

Surulere: Face-to-face With Cruel Tanker Fire

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It was a tragic night for the people of Lagos State on Tuesday, October 2 as a tanker loaded with petrol burst into flames and killed about 15 people while property worth millions of Naira were destroyed. The explosion, which occurred at the National Stadium bus stop in Surulere area of the state affected vehicles nearby and caused grievous damages.

Investigations revealed that the incident took place at about 8:30p.m. at the peak of traffic while people were retiring home from their work places. The fire raged till 1a.m. before it was finally extinguished.

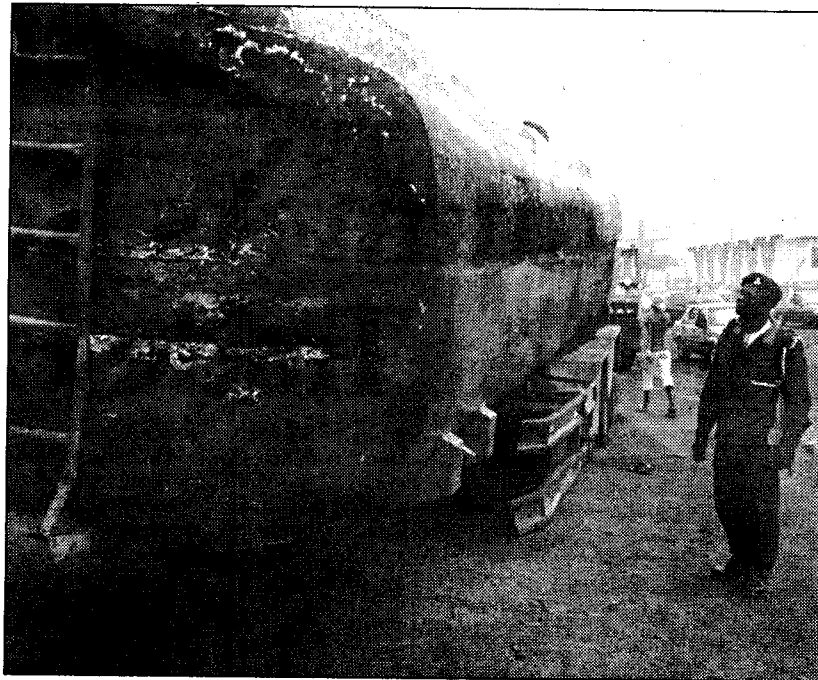
The tanker, it was gathered, was coming from Ijora to Ojuelegba while descending from the Funsho Williams (formerly Western) avenue bridge had its head detached from the body and rammed into some vehicles in the traffic. The tanker immediately exploded while the fire later spread to about seven other vehicles. Among the victims of the burnt vehicles was a couple that was burnt inside their jeep and an 'Okada' rider who lost his life as his motorcycle was burnt beyond recognition while several other persons sustained serious injuries.

The fire also affected portion of the wall of the National Stadium and a mosque.

A trader, who gave his name simply as Uche, said the incident occurred when the tanker was descending from the bridge and was swerving left and right.

"As the tanker was descending from the bridge, it was swerving as if it couldn't control itself and immediately, I sensed something bad would happen. All of us ran away from the end of the bridge. Other vehicles from behind moved back as well as those in front, to create space for the tanker.

"Fuel was also spilling from its fuel tank and as it descended, it rammed



• The tanker

into vehicles. The tanker exploded and fire broke out. The fire later spread to other vehicles due to the traffic jam and many people died while several others were seriously injured," he said.

According to the Chief Superintendent, National Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Daramola Samuel Okushina, the inferno was caused by an 'Okada' rider who was trying to fix his motor cycle that developed engine problem at the road side. He disclosed that as the fuel-loaded tanker was descending the bridge, suddenly, it lost control. The driver jumped out of the vehicle thereby causing the crash. The tanker fell and fuel spilled all over the road.

It was gathered that motorists were asked to switch off the engines of their vehicles. However, as the 'Okada' rider had fixed the motorcycle and pushed it to a distance, he attempted to start

the bike and a spark ignited the spilled fuel leading to the inferno.

"We tried all we could to put out the flame and rescue people trapped in the blaze. We cannot mention the exact number of lives lost but the corpses have been moved to the mortuary," he said.

The incident caused hiccups in the traffic flow in the environment as policemen and officials of the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA), battled to put the situation under control. Rescue operation was however hampered due to crowd that gathered at the scene.

Consequently, several of the survivors were said to be receiving treatment at the Lagos State General Hospital and some private hospitals in the area.

The tragedy happened barely a month after another tanker went up in flames after it exploded at the Onipanu

bus stop along Ikorodu expressway killing two persons and injuring many others. It would also be recalled that about eight days before then, another one had occurred on the Oshodi/Apapa Expressway, which left about a dozen vehicles completely burnt.

Tankers had in the recent past constituted a lot of havoc to the lives of people as well as property. Due to their highly inflammable products, they were during the tenure of Buhari/Idiagbon, restricted to moving at night in order to safeguard lives and property. But after the expiration of that administration, the tanker drivers returned to ply the roads at any period of the day.

More disturbing is the agony and long waiting motorists that ply expressways in the state are subjected to as tanker drivers usually park their trucks indiscriminately along the roads and in the process of taking over the entire road.

The situation was conspicuous on

the Apapa/Oshodi expressway, Ijora Overhead Bridge and Moshood Abiola Way (formerly Apapa Road). At a point, motorists dreaded plying these routes as the tankers were always parked haphazardly without concern for other road users. The condition has made commuters and motorists groan over the man-hour lost daily as a result of the heavy traffic jam caused by petroleum tankers which are arbitrarily parked on both sides of the expressway by their drivers. The traffic, most of the time stretches from Coconut Bus stop to the top of the bridge at Mile 2 Bus stop, a distance of approximately four kilometres and the vehicles move very slowly - bumper to bumper.

Reports have it that the traffic jam has led to occasional scuffles between commercial bus drivers and the truck drivers while hapless car owners continue to call on government to provide alternative routes and parking space for the tankers.



• Security operatives at the scene of the fire

Photo: Sunday Ohwo