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Daily Independent (Lagos)

Nigeria: 70 Die in Anambra Road Accident

Okoye Maduforo

10 October 2009

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Awka — It was horror on Friday in Anambra State when over 70 persons perished in a road accident that occurred at Umunya Junction along Onitsha-Awka expressway.

A tanker conveying fuel from Onitsha to Awka had overturned at the 20-metre notorious bad spot at Umunya Junction and fuel was flowing uncontrollably along the highway.

Other vehicles including private and commuter buses had to follow the narrow part of the highway since a police check point had blocked the freer stop.

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According to an eye witness, as a BMW car was about passing by the side of the fallen tanker an explosion was heard and a long stretch of seven commuter buses, a Toyota Hilux pick-up van and the tanker went up in flame.

The Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) Sector Commander, Mr. B.N. Ekenna, who confirmed the incident, said, "we got information this afternoon at about 1:15 p.m. that a tanker fell here carrying fuel and it had been gutted. Then we, (Nteje, Awka and Onitsha Commands) rushed to the scene. As we came it was very late and the fire has been raging. Then nine vehicles on the whole were involved it had the tanker six buses, one Hilux pick-up van and a car. Five people jumped out alive and other survivors were with the crowd, some with bruises and we have taken them to the General Hospital Umunya.

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"We can't be sure about the number of survivors but these group of youths, 11 of them from the Okpoko Community Youth, Onitsha, who were said to be attending a burial at Nsukka, and five others survived.

"Honestly, we cannot estimate the number that had died but you can see that six commuter buses were full of complete passengers and only 17 can be confirmed as those that escaped and you can see that the fire is still burning so the number could be between 70 or more than that but we are still not sure until we complete the evacuation."

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Anambra State Police Commissioner, Philemon Leha, who was also at the scene of the incident, told reporters that "the incident is a very sad one and lives have been lost. It is unfortunate we are making effort at evacuating the vehicles and also trying to identify those involved in the accident."

One of the survivors, a young man in his late 20s, Earnest Ogbonna, said, "we were on our way from Onitsha and we met a hold up. Suddenly, we saw fire everywhere. I was sitting in front of the bus and I cannot say how I ran out. I don't even know what happened to those with me in the bus and I have not seen them since then. I don't even know if they survived."

Miss Chinelo Oguama, who also cheated death said: "It was gas that poured all over the road and one of the buses got heated up then exploded. The other three buses that were in front of us only three people that came out, the rest are still burning inside the bus they could not come out and the bus is filled to the brim.

"I do not even know the way I came out I just found myself outside. I entered under the vehicle

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and there was a lot of smoke and people were in that mud and people were trying to help us out. They told me later that I fainted."

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A bus driver, Innocent Okoye, told Saturday Independent that the only free area that vehicles could pass through was blocked by a police check point, "that was why we had to go close to the tanker to pass so suddenly we heard an explosion. Had it been the police check point created a space we would have passed. My vehicle had 14 passengers and the other three buses were full with two other

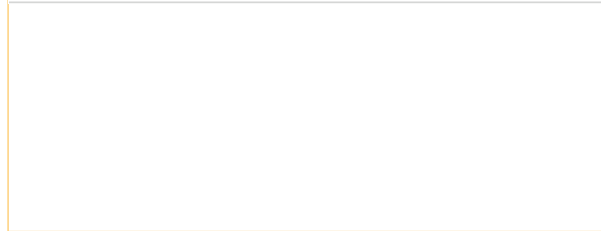
buses behind us. That person burning on the ground is the conductor of the bus in front of us."

But the Chief Press Secretary to the Anambra State Governor, Mike Udah, told reporters when he arrived an hour after the incident that "the governor had gone out before this thing happened but you can see the police commissioner and the commander of the artillery in the army. They bemoan the incident especially the element of haste by the drivers that caused the incident.

"We learnt that the tanker was here hours before the fire started and police had barricaded the area only for a convoy of Abuja politicians to find their way through and the other drivers followed them."







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