

PHCN Cables Electrocute 40 In Port Harcourt

• *As Rainstorm Wreaks Havoc*

By **Ofonime Umanah**
Bureau Chief, Port Harcourt

PORT Harcourt, the *Garden City* was plunged into mourning on Saturday after an early morning downpour felled some electricity poles in the

Trans-Amadi area of the Rivers State capital.

While eyewitnesses put the death toll at 40 with several critically injured, the government confirmed the death of 10.

The rainfall lasted from 7.25

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a.m. till 12.38 p.m. on Saturday.

An eyewitness recounted to *Sunday Independent* that the victims got electrocuted while walking past the drenched road.

He said at least 25 others were critically injured and have since been taken to the hospital.

"The tragedy occurred when a thunderstorm accompanied by a downpour struck down a tension line belonging to the PHCN (Power Holding Company of Nigeria) in the industrial haven of the city," the eyewitness said, adding that construction workers have started rescue operation.

Most of the dead were children, *Sunday Independent* gathered.

Officials of the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) and top government officials rushed to the scene to cut off power supply, an intervention that eyewitnesses said saved several other lives.

The PHCN, meanwhile, had opened investigation into Saturday's snapping of its high-tension wire in the city, hours after the incident.

John Onyi, a Senior Public Relations Officer of PHCN in Port Harcourt, told newsmen that the wire snapped following a heavy downpour.

He said the company had iso-

lated the Oginigba and Slaughter areas of the city where the wire broke to save lives and property.

The Rivers State Police Command's spokeswoman, Rita Innoma-Abbey, a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), confirmed that the police recovered 10 bodies, but noted that the death toll was still being counted. She also said 12 persons were in critical condition at press time. The dead bodies, Innoma-Abbey said, were deposited at the Braithwaite Memorial Hospital in Port Harcourt.

An angry Rivers State chapter of the Action Congress (AC) pilloried PHCN over the incident. The party's spokesman,

Eze Chukwuemeka, said in a text message that the deaths would have been avoided if the agency had taken steps to ensure that their facilities were in good shape.

The party called on the state government to probe the incident to ascertain the extent of PHCN's culpability.

The party, however, sympathised with the families of those whose relatives were affected.

The state government however claimed only 10 lives were lost and that it would make efforts to give medical care to those injured.

The Commissioner for Information, Ibim Seminitari, said in

a live radio programme that the government was unhappy over the occurrence.

Earlier, Secretary to the Government of Rivers State, Magnus Abe, visited the scene of the incident and the hospital to assess the degree of damage.

Though a construction worker told *Sunday Independent* that he counted 40 dead bodies at about 4.20 p.m., Abe told reporters that the police and the hospital management confirmed only 10 persons dead.

He reiterated that government will pick the bills of all those injured in the incident, noting that efforts were being made by government to contact the families of the deceased.