

Tears Of Blood In Imo Community As Oil Explosion Kills Over 200



By Anolu Vincent On Apr 30, 2022

FEATURED NEWS



The dead being bagged for mass burial

*The Imo State government, on Tuesday, conducted a mass burial for victims of the recent explosion that occurred at an illegal oil refinery in Agbaezi, Ohaji-Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State. The remains of the over 100 persons who died at the scene were buried in three graves dug at the site of the explosion. **ANOLU VINCENT**, however, provides the graphic details of the fire disaster*

Abizi and Okwuzi communities in the Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area are among the prominent oil-producing neighborhoods in Imo State.

The densely populated communities, which are also famous for agricultural productivity with close proximity to Rivers State, are, however, infamous for youths restiveness occasioned by the alleged inability of both the state government and the oil companies operating in their domain to meet their corporate social responsibilities to the indigenes.

This has more often than not resulted in violent confrontations with the authorities of the oil giants leading to the destruction and vandalism of sensitive installations including pipelines.

Depressed and frustrated by the lack of gainful employment to keep body and soul together, it was gathered that the youths, most of who are ex-militants later found succour in illegal bunkering and refining of petroleum products with reckless abandon.

Critical stakeholders of the communities although conscious of these nefarious activities were said to have glossed over the shady vocation so as to keep the youths busy and stem their rampant violent confrontations with both the government and the multinational corporations thereby lending a veiled legitimacy to their operations.

Thus, with an unhindered access to the natural resource in their locality, the youths wallowed in affluence and enjoyed the good things of life.

However, things went awry on Friday, April 22, 2022, when the entire 16 villages of Egbema were thrown into wailings, lamentations and mourning following the sudden death of their sons and daughters as well as their innocent and beloved ones and family members numbering up to 200 in an oil explosion that shook the communities to their very foundation.

The hapless victims, some of who were roasted beyond recognition included some indigenes of Anambra and Rivers States.

The blood-chilling incident was adjudged the worst calamity in the history of the communities and also consumed an uncountable number of vehicles and motorcycles belonging to some of the businessmen and women as well as the youths who lost their lives in the earth-shaking oil explosion.

Also destroyed were properties and facilities of the bunkering business deal, farmlands and crops estimated at millions of naira.

Among the victims of the fire disaster was a student nurse, Blessing Ajie, who was said to be a member of the Emmanuel Anglican Church Abacheke-Egbema.

Miss Blessing was said to have returned from school and decided to visit the site of bunkering ostensibly to make money like others, oblivious of the danger ahead of her.

With tears of sorrow and lamentation, a member of the Ajie family who refused to give his name told Saturday INDEPENDENT that Blessing had since been buried.

Bravo Ajie, a septuagenarian and father of the deceased who wept profusely, said that it was taboo for him to talk to the press because of the way Blessing died.

Sunday Nduleri, Chairman of Abacheke Community lamenting the incident, disclosed that the number of casualties had risen to 200, saying, “even some of those who sustained various degrees of injury and were rushed to nearby hospitals for urgent medical attention had equally lost their lives,” he lamented.

Nduleri, an engineer, attributed the incident to the idleness and joblessness of the youths and appealed to the state government to urgently engage the youths in meaningful ventures to forestall recurrence.

He also enjoined the state government to offer contracts to them to divert their attention from such illegal business, even as he bemoaned wanton neglect of the Egbema Community by the government and the oil companies operating in the area.

“Egbema land has no roads, electricity and potable water despite the fact that it produces barrels of oil and gas every year without any development.”

Nduleri further appealed to the youths to allow a sleeping dog to lie and join hands in the efforts to reach out to the global oil giants in their area to begin to discharge their corporate social responsibilities to their host communities.

“I appeal to every leader in Abacheke and the entire Egbema to henceforth go home and do the needful to stop the illegal bunkering business in his area,” he warned.

The National Youth President of Ohaji, Comrade Chinonye Ugorji, reacting, described the incident as highly regrettable.

He told our correspondent that if there is a way government could rehabilitate the boys who, according to him, were trained in the amnesty programme of former President Yar’Adua, it would help to reduce their illegal activities.

He said the youths, having waited for too long to be incorporated in government programmes but to no avail, resorted to indulging in all forms of activities both legal and illegal as means of livelihood.

The youth president said that each time you tell these boys to shun the bunkering activities, “they will in return ask you what you would want them to do to survive.”

He described it as unfortunate that nobody, even the government, including the Imo State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (ISOPADEC), which is an interventionist agency is taking care of the idle youths.

He said ISOPADEC was no more empowering the youths or supporting them despite the fact that the oil-producing Local Government Area of Ohaji/Egbema contributes 90 per cent of revenue to the state government.

The youth president assured that if the youths are rehabilitated, the situation would never be the same in the area, stating that the number of illegal bunkering sites in Ohaji/Egbema cannot be disputed but that the fact remains that if allowed to continue, the adverse effect on every community and village in the area would be horrible.

He commended the new Army Brigade Commander of the 34 Artillery Brigade Obinze who, according to him, had dismantled and shut down some of these illegal bunkering sites in Ohaji/Egbema LGA.

The Egbema Youth President, Okenya Theadus Mario, also described the incident as unfortunate, adding that he had visited the scene where he discovered that uncountable number of persons were burnt beyond recognition.

Our correspondent who visited the scene saw burnt corpses, vehicles, motorcycles, and bicycles scattered all over the entire area.

Expectedly, a good number of sympathisers have visited the place to see things for themselves including the member representing the Ohaji/Egbema State Constituency in the State House of Assembly, Hon. Heclus Okoro.

Meanwhile, the Imo State Government had declared one Okenze Onyenwoke, owner of the illegal refinery site located at Abezi forest in the Local Government Area wanted.

Governor Hope Uzodimma, through the Commissioner for Petroleum Resources, Hon. Goodluck Opiah, made the statement when he visited the site.

Opiah, a former Speaker of the State House of Assembly and an indigene of Egbema, said the fire consumed the lives of so many youths, adding that the calamity equally destroyed the aquatic life of the community.

He identified most of the people who are engaging in the act as people from Rivers, Bayelsa and other neighbouring states, adding that it is sabotage for the people to allow this illegal activity to continue.

Governor Uzodimma, on behalf of the people and government of Imo State, condoled with the bereaved families, while praying to God to grant them the fortitude to bear the irreparable loss.

An eyewitness and an indigene of the community who identified himself as Eze Ikedi said that the incident happened around 11 p.m, describing it as unfortunate. He said residents of the area woke up to see the huge flame in the Abizi forest.

When our correspondent visited the house of a father of six children from Etekwuru in Ohaji/Egbema LGA, Uche Okwodu, who also lost one of his children, said that all efforts and series of warnings he gave to his 17-year old son, Onyekachi Okwodu, fell on deaf ears.

The lawmaker representing Ohaji/Egbema in the State House of Assembly, Hon. Okoro, while speaking at the site said that he would report to Governor Uzodimma on what he had seen at the site and advised the youths to take what happened as a lesson.

Meanwhile, the Independent Petroleum Marketers Association of Nigeria (IPMAN) has urged the government at all levels to intensify efforts to check the operations of illegal refineries in the country. IPMAN's President, Mr Chinedu Okoronkwo, made the call in an interview with the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) on Friday in Lagos. Okoronkwo said the recent explosion at one of the illegal refineries at Abaezi forest in Ohaji-Egbema Local Government Area of Imo had again brought to the forefront the dangers of engaging in such nefarious activities. He said: "IPMAN as a body commiserates with the government and people of Imo over the deaths and injuries recorded in the incident.

"We believe this tragedy could have been averted if the various tiers of government and the security agencies were alive to their responsibilities.

"We are, therefore, calling on the local, state and federal governments to intensify efforts to check the operations of these illegal refineries within their domains."

Okoronkwo said Nigeria was losing billions of naira to crude oil thieves, which was affecting the nation's economy negatively, adding that, the environmental degradation being caused by their activities could not be overemphasised, especially in the Niger Delta region.

He urged other state governors to emulate Rivers Governor, Nyesom Woke, who had taken the campaign against oil bunkering in the state very seriously.



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