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100 feared dead in Nigerian pipeline fire

By Will Connors

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LAGOS, Nigeria: More than 100 people were feared dead on Thursday after a construction vehicle struck an oil pipeline on the outskirts of Lagos, Nigeria's biggest city, setting off an oil-fed inferno that spread to surrounding homes and a school.

"The fire was very high," said Johnson Fabunmi, a doctor who lives in the area. "Everyone was running for their life."

There were vastly differing accounts of the toll. Nigerian Red Cross officials said that at least 100 people died, but a representative of the Nigerian Emergency Management Agency said that only 10 died, including a 2-year-old, and that 36 were injured.

There have been many rebel attacks on oil pipelines in Nigeria, Africa's leading exporter of crude oil and the eight largest in the world, attacks on oil pipelines are common, particularly in the troubled, oil-rich southeastern Niger Delta region. So are fires related to pipeline leaks — some caused by poverty-stricken people trying to siphon oil to resell on the black market. But the Lagos police said the Thursday fire appeared to be an accident.

The fire began when a road grader performing maintenance in the suburb of Ijegun struck the pipeline, sending oil gushing onto the vehicle, according to a coordinator for the emergency agency, Abdulsalam Mohammed. "Unfortunately, there was a spark, and the operator of the grader died instantly," he said. Hundreds of residents fled their homes, and local schoolchildren were evacuated.

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"The children got out, but some of them were injured," said Agha Idiam, a journalist for a local paper, Thisday, who visited the site. "Directly outside the school gate is a market, so you can imagine the scene."

At least 45 people were killed in Lagos last December when the fuel they were siphoning from a buried pipeline caught fire. In December 2006, another pipeline ruptured by thieves caught fire, killing about 260. In May of that year, 150 died in pipeline explosion east of Lagos, and another such fire in 1998 killed 1,500 in southern Nigeria.

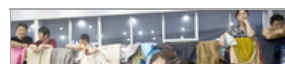
The vast majority of Nigeria's 130 million people live on less than \$2 a day.

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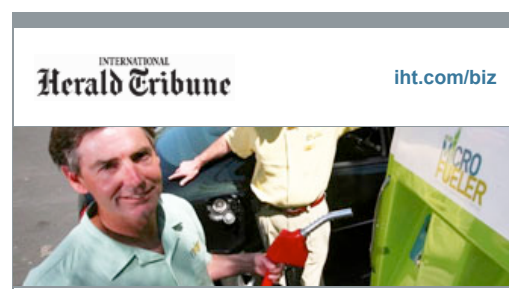
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