

Haunted By Guilt

As victims of the collapsed four storeys building in Lagos count their losses, the developer is on the run to avoid possible contacts with journalists

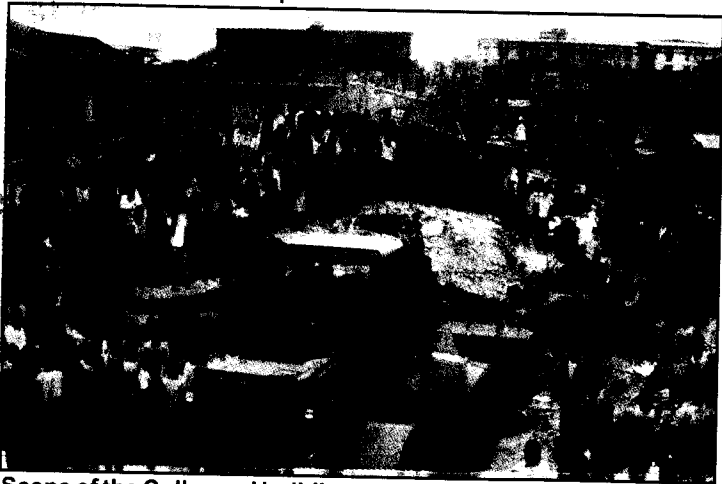
By Sebastine Obasi

BROKEN TELEVISIONS, SETS, refrigerators, cooking stoves, plates, clothes, boxes, photo albums and other personal effects catch the eyes as one approaches 71, Bola Street, off Ibadan Street, Ebute Metta, the site of a four storey building which collapsed in Lagos recently. At the ruins that used to be a building of 36 apartments and 20 shops, properties belonging to the occupants were scattered everywhere.

More than 49 lives were lost in the avoidable disaster, while about 70 others suffered various degrees of injuries.

Celestina Agbii, a student of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Afikpo and a native of Ebonyi State is one of the survivors. Agbii, who came to do her industrial

attachment in Lagos, was living with her brothers. At Kuba Clinic, where she is presently receiving treatment. She stated that she was alone in their apartment, when the incident occurred. According to her, she heard a deafening noise, which prompted her to rush to the balcony. When she looked around and found the building sinking, she intuitively jumped



Scene of the Collapsed building

from the first floor into the next compound and sustained injuries on her two legs. Though her brothers were not around at the time, they lost all their belongings.

One Alhaja Adewura, a middle-aged woman, was equally lucky. She was on the ground floor to rent video cassette. Immediately she entered the shop, the building started to collapse. She saw herself being rescued, but could not account for the shop owner and other customers, who were there when it happened. For Patience Okoh, a 60-year old woman from Enugu State, her being alive today is a miracle. She was in the building together with her daughter and the son-in-law, when it collapsed. While she was saved, her son-in-law and the daughter died. Most of the victims either dead or alive were kept at Bambo hospital, Kuba Clinic, Dunik Hospital, and Saint Paul's Hospital all in Ebute Metta. Others were kept at General Hospital, Gbagada and Lagos Island General Hospital.

The high casualty recorded in the incident would not have been so, if rescue had come immediately it occurred. Infact, no meaningful rescue operation was carried out until Julius Berger, a construction company, came at about 10.30 am the following day. This is more than 16 hours after the building collapsed. Again, the rescue operation was significantly hampered by the power outage in the area shortly after the incident occurred.

Newswatch gathered that the building was originally meant to be a two-storey block as approved by the relevant authorities, but was extended to four-storeys by the developer, Kunle Usman. When the unauthorised development was going on, the requisite state agency was alerted on the danger posed by the structure, but that was ignored.

A week to the collapse of the building, an 11-year old girl fell and drowned in a deep well sunk by Usman, around another building being handled by him. The girl had stumbled while trying to climb the staircase at the three-storey building located at Osholake Street, Ebute Metta and plunged into the well situated under the staircase. It was gathered that the well was hurriedly built,

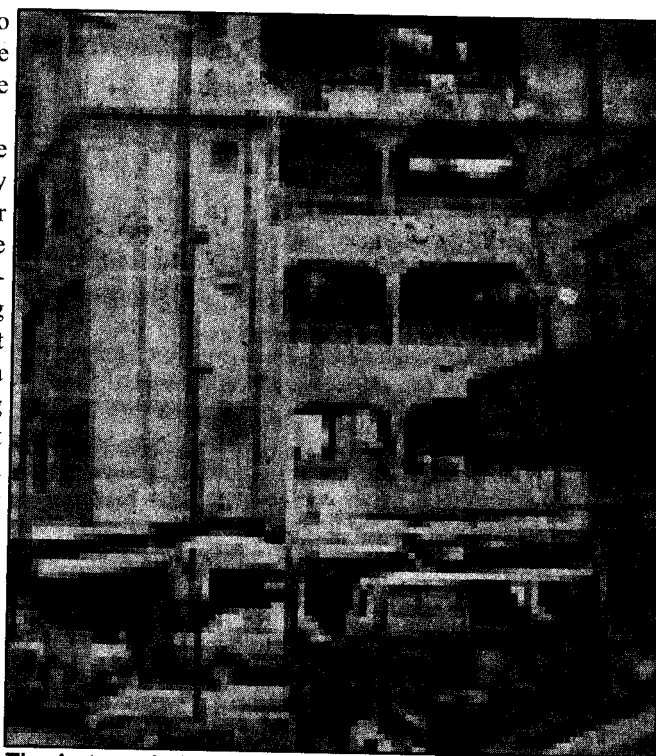
as there was no provision for it in the original plan of the building.

Apart from the collapsed four-storey building, other houses built by the developer are a three-storey building of 23 flats, located at 49 Ibadan Street, a two-storey building of 20 flats located at 51 Coates Street and another two-storey building of 19 flats located at 42 Ibadan Street. The other one is a two-storey building of 13 flats situated at 77B Bola street. These buildings are within the Ebute Metta area.

Tunji Makanjuola, a resident of 77B Bola street, said that he paid a five year rent at N100,000 per annum in 2004, for a self-contained apartment. Besides, he also provided the doors, water closet as well as paid for the electric connection, all at a cost of N80,000.

Binuyo Ogunmola, an employee of Mid Maritime Services, stated that he paid N76,000 per annum for five years rent, to the land lord of the property, situated at 42 Ibadan Street. Kehinde Akapo, who was identified as the land lord, said he was given the last floor by the developer to manage. Adebimpe Eti-Oloja, a victim of the collapsed building, pointed out that she recently paid N320,000 before she was allowed to pack into her apartment.

Curiously, the developer used to live in the same building, but packed out a few months before the collapse, probably after noticing that the house was on the verge of collapse. Presently, he has gone into hiding. He has equally closed his known offices at 138/148 Odi-Ose street, Orile Igammu and 11A Ereko street, Lagos Island, as a result of the incident. With the following numbers; 080-23290341, 080-23290107, 080-32483609 and 01-4810703 linked to him, he could not be reached. However, when 01-7742758 and 01-80443589 found



The 4-storey building before its collapse

on one of the receipts, he issued were tried, only the first one clicked. A lady, who claimed to be his wife, stated that the address was not his office. She said that her husband used it merely as a contact point. She later gave the man's number as 080-37181051, when she was made to understand that the call was based on an earlier appointment for a business deal. When the man was called, he denied being the developer, but admitted knowing him.

Olufemi Akinsola, general secretary, Nigerian Institute of Building, NIB, has blamed the state government for the increasing incidence of collapsed buildings. "Government knows all the defective buildings in the city. And its officials have even marked some of them for demolition. As a professional body, there is little or nothing we can do than to alert the real but action rests with the government," he said.

When he visited the scene, Bola Tinubu, Lagos state governor, promised that the government will deal with whoever was connected with the collapsed building. He pointed out that a committee would be set up to look into the problem of defective houses in Lagos and promised to rehabilitate the victims of the collapsed building.

Tinubu also said that the state government has taken over the site of the collapsed building. ■