



• Razed: The Lawals' residence



• Malam Usman Mohammed

WITH thick smoke billowing into the sky, residents of Bakin Ruwa, a suburb in Kaduna State were up scampering for cover. Reason: Known to be a flashpoint for religious crises, residents simply concluded that another riot had begun. A predominantly muslim enclave, it is believed that when this tiny town shakes, the entire state shakes because of its volatility.

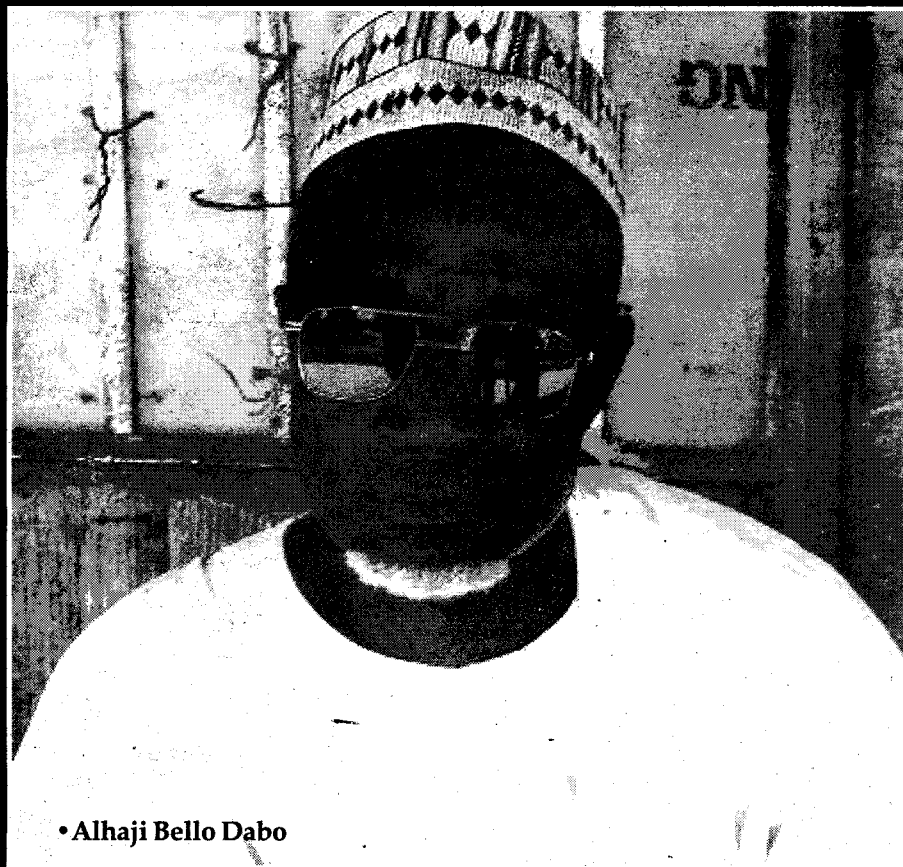
Indeed, tragedy struck, but in another form. On Friday 15 June, 2007, Alhaji Musa Dabo, 55, soaked in tears, narrated how his bosom friend of decades, Alhaji Lawal Usman and 10 other members of his family were roasted to death in an early morning inferno. "None of them was alive to tell us what caused the fire," said Dabo.

The fire which started at exactly 4:30 am, spared nothing in the MM 3 Nnamdi Azikiwe Express bye-pass residence of the Lawals. It consumed everything including the occupants, Lawal, who is said to be in his late 50s and the bread winner of the family, his wife. Also consumed by the fire is a bride-to-be, 25-year old Fatima and all the children in the house. In all, eleven people died in the inferno in less than an hour that the fire raged.

Fatima's intended groom, Mustapha escaped death because he was taking care of another resident of the house Mahdi Lawal, who was on admission at the Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital (ABUTH), Shika in Zaria. Mustapha escaped death by the whiskers because he had just left the house when the incident happened. Mahdi is now the only surviving son of Alhaji Lawal. But for the surviving duo, life can never be the same again.

Shocked by the incident, Kaduna State Governor Namadi Sambo was among the early callers to the scene. Hundreds of sympathisers have also relocated to the expansive residence of business mogul and owner of Chanchangi Airlines, Alhaji Ahmadu Chanchangi, who is a relative of the deceased. Lawal, who hailed from Takum in Taraba State, before his death worked as a civilian staff with the nation's foremost military university, the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA), Kaduna.

But what caused the fire? How did it all start? Trying unsuccessfully to hold back tears, Dabo volunteered, "on that day, there was power outage until



• Alhaji Bello Dabo

Fiery end of a family

• How family of 11 perished in early morning inferno

■ Godwin ISENYO, Kaduna ■

around 4:30am when the Power Holding Company Of Nigeria (PHCN) restored electricity supply but the voltage was abnormal. Then, we suddenly heard shout from neighbours calling for help. But nobody could do

anything. The entire one storey building of the Lawals had been razed.

"When we got to the scene of the incident, in our attempt to put off the fire, we didn't see anybody. We thought they had all gone to the hospital where one of the sons (Mahdi) was on admission. But to our greatest surprise,

By the time we finally gained access into the house, we saw the man (Lawal) lying down at the door step. He must have struggled to open the door. Somebody even said they saw him struggling to open the door but he couldn't because of the heavy padlock on it

we later discovered that the entire household got trapped and was burnt to death. We could not rescue anybody or property from the inferno."

Still recounting what led to the fire, Dabo told *The Nation* that perhaps the damage would have been minimal had rescuers gained access into the apartment in good time. "In fact, by the time we finally gained access into the house, we saw the man (Lawal) lying down at the door step. He must have struggled to open the door. Somebody even said they saw him struggling to open the door but he couldn't because of the heavy padlock on it."

In an emotion laden voice, Dabo continued, "one of the daughters (Fatima) due to be given out for marriage was even heard shouting; please help me! Please, help me!! Please, help me!!! I am still alive' but there was nowhere we could pass into the house."

Still in shock is Usman Mohammed, who had worked for Lawal in his grinding mill in the past seven years. The last conversation he had with his boss was how he would visit his sick son, Mahdi in the hospital the following day.

Oblivious of what had happened on the dark Friday, Mohammed said when he came to resume work at the mill, "I was told that my boss of more than seven years, including his entire family had died."