

NEWS

RESOURCE CONTROL AGITATORS OR MONARCH'S KIDNAPPERS?



• The kidnapped monarch and father of the Bayelsa State Deputy Governor, His Royal Highness Simon Ebebi, after his rescue in Yenagoa, the state capital.



• Chief Ebebi (middle), alighting from the speed-boat after his rescue.



• Faces of the alleged kidnappers after they were arrested in the creeks of Bayelsa State.



• Another masked suspected kidnapper after his arrest.

Death toll hits 60 in Lagos pipeline explosion

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Ajuonuma said although the fire had been put out, the heat in the area was searing. He said the exact number of those who died in the inferno would be clear later.

Ajuonuma regretted the incident, recalling a similar fire last year at Abule-Egba and appealed to Nigerians to join NNPC in fighting the crime.

"It is a crime that has a lot of danger. We talk and warn people and they don't listen," he said.

In a statement later, Ajuonuma said: "Vandals struck at about 3a.m on the night of December 25, 2007 at Ikate near Atlas Cove jetty. Two points were punctured directly on the line and the vandals were scooping fuel directly into jerry cans and loading same into boats waiting on standby.

"In the process, fire ignited, resulting in several casualties. While we regret the loss of lives, we wish to reiterate that pipeline vandalism remains a serious economic crime that requires support of all well-meaning Nigerians to stop. We appeal to communities along the pipeline right-of-way of the NNPC to report all incidents of attempted pipeline tampering/vandalism to the NNPC.

"The fire, which resulted from vandalism, has since

been put out and the development will in no way affect petroleum products supply and distribution as the Pipeline and Products Marketing Company (PPMC) has been able to stock over 30 days of supply in strategic depots across the country.

"Meanwhile, effort to re-stream the line is ongoing. We, therefore, discourage any panic buying or hoarding of petroleum products in this season. We wish Nigerians a blissful Yuletide and a happy new year."

The scared villagers went into hiding for fear of arrest by security operatives. Members of the Red Cross Society were at work, searching for unfound bodies. They said the charred bodies of the victims they found had been buried in a mass grave.

Some villagers, who spoke with our correspondent were evasive on the cause of the fire. They said the death toll was around 45. The victims, they said, were mostly women and teenagers, who went to scoop fuel to make some money.

About three weeks ago, four officials of the PPMC were trapped in a pipeline explosion at Arepo, Akute on the outskirts of Lagos when a product line from Atlas Cove to Mosimi was vandalised, and fire erupted.

CHRONOLOGY OF PIPELINE FIRES

| Date | Place | Casualty |
|---------------|-------------------------------|----------|
| Oct. 1998 | Jesse, Delta State | 1082 |
| March 2000 | Osisioma, Abia State | 50 |
| June 2003 | Onicha-Amayi Abia State | 125 |
| Sept. 2004 | Imore, Lagos State | 50 |
| May 2005 | Ilado, Lagos State | 50 |
| May 2006 | Inagbe Beach, Lagos State | 115 |
| Dec. 2006 | Abule-Egba Lagos State | 260 |
| Dec. 12, 2007 | Arepo Village, Lagos State | 1 |
| Dec. 25, 2007 | Apagbo Village Lagos State | 60 |

One of the officials died and four others were injured.

The Lagos State Commissioner for Health, Dr Jide Idris, confirmed that the victims of the latest incident had been buried. He said the burial was to prevent epidemics in the area, adding that health officials had begun to fumigate the affected coast-line.

Idris appealed to the Federal Government to secure the pipelines and warned Lagos residents against scooping fuel from vandalised pipelines.

Pipeline vandals had earlier cut open a section of the pipeline ferrying refined petroleum products from

the Atlas Cove Jetty, Lagos, to depots in the South-West. They stole large quantities of the products.

When the villages found the vandalised pipelines open and gushing out petroleum products, some of them decided to help themselves - unmindful of history.

A similar incident in May 2006 claimed 150 of those who were also scooping fuel from a vandalised pipeline on the same creek.

Despite the series of pipeline explosions in Lagos in the past few years, people still build houses and live on NNPC pipeline right-of-way. For instance, the remedied explosion site of

Abule-Egba has become a beehive of activities, less than a year after no fewer than 20 people died in an explosion there. The scenario abounds in many parts of Lagos.

Stakeholders have several times expressed concerns over the government's seeming nonchallant attitude to the endangered lives of its citizens.

Shortly after the Abule-Egba incident, Ajuonuma told a foreign reporter that government has explored several options to dissuade Nigerians from tampering with petroleum pipelines but little or no result was achieved as the fuel scoopers attributed their acts to poverty.

His words: "Pipeline vandalism is suicided and it's a criminal activity. So while what happened is regrettable, it does not justify anybody destroying government property. Now people give all kinds of excuses. They say because there's hunger, there is poverty, desperation, and so on and so forth.

"So we're trying to educate people and tell them that there may be hunger; there may be poverty, but it does not justify criminal activity," he said.

NNPC has a strong community outreach programme. We go out to the communities that have what

we called the pipeline right of way and we educate them, and we talk with them, and we discourage them from building on the pipeline.

"For example, as an oil company we take our social responsibility seriously. These communities have schools built for them; they have health amenities. They have really the basic necessities for life. But what really happens is that there are a few people who are bent on quick money. They want to cash in on any little emergency they see to make quick money. "The Nigerian government has recently approved new measures to protect pipelines, including the use of modern technology. "The technology has gone very far. You can use computer sensor chips that can detect movements around the pipelines.

The government has just approved that a new set of measures be put in place, including burying the pipeline deeper into the soil. There is even a physical surveillance by security agencies. So everything is being done to protect the pipelines. But the most important issue is the education and enlightenment of people to know that nothing justifies tampering with an inflammable product pipeline. It will result in tragedy," he said.