



Deputy Senate President, Ike Ekweremadu (left) displaying his temporary new National Driver's Licence at FRSC Headquarters in Abuja yesterday. With him is Corps Marshal, Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC), Osita Chidoka PHOTO: ABAYOMI FAYESE

## Perm Sec appointment: More knocks for First Lady, Bayelsa Gov

■ Segun AJIBOYE and Oziegbe OKOEKI ■

**T**HE mid week appointment of the First Lady, Dame Patience

Jonathan, as a Permanent Secretary by the Bayelsa State government drew more flak yesterday with constitutional lawyer, Professor Itsay Sagay, calling it a huge joke, comical and nonsense.

"It is a huge joke. It is comical. I don't really know what they take us for. It is only in Nigeria that you can have such kind of bizarre announcement. It is nonsense," Sagay told "The Nation" on Saturday.

Human rights activist and member of the Constitution Review Committee, Mr. Olisa Agabkoba (SAN), who is currently out of the country, expressed shock on phone saying: "That cannot be true."

After a prolonged laughter,

Agabkoba asked: "And did she accept it?"

He later promised to call back after a check on the story.

He sent a text message that he was unable to confirm the story and said: "I can't confirm, so, until I'm back."

Activist and gubernatorial candidate of the National Conscience Party (NCP) for Lagos State in the last general elections, Comrade Ayodele Akele, would rather "wait and make some findings" before taking a stance on the issue.

According to Akele, "I don't know her civil service background. I would advise that we find out some things about her history with the Bayelsa State civil service before making any statement."

Continuing, Akele said: "We need to establish if she was in the state civil service and if she was on leave of absence when her husband became governor of the state. I won't have any problem with it if she meets all the requirements for the appointment. I know the wives of some public officials who are in the civil service. We wouldn't say such women should not be promoted because their husbands are public officials. So we should find her records of service before making a statement on whether she merits the appointment or not."

President of the Campaign for Democracy (CD), Dr. Joe Okei-Odumakin, snapped: "It is shocking. It has turned governance to a huge joke. It's the theatre of the absurd that can make Nigeria become a laughing stock in the comity of nations. The country is gradually becoming a banana republic."

Victor Opara, lawyer and former Secretary General of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Ikeja branch, said the appointment smacks of nepotism, and expressed hope that the First Lady would turn down the appointment.

"For me, this is nepotism of the highest order. However, there is nothing wrong with it if she is qualified."

Opara said in a nation like Nigeria, "when you appoint your sister, brother or family members into a position of authority, people would read meanings to it. Sincerely, I don't expect the First Lady to take the appointment."

Deputy Whip of the Lagos State House of Assembly, Rotimi Abiru accused Governor Seriake Dickson of being unnecessarily generous in making the appointment.

Abiru said the governor was wrong to have promoted Mrs. Jonathan to Permanent Secretary when she is already occupying the office of the First Lady.

His words: "I don't understand what informed the appointment because the position of a Permanent Secretary is meant for seasoned Civil Servants who have gone through many levels in the service. Permanent Secretaries are policy makers and they are the engine room of the government."

"Looking at the initial position of the First Lady, though it is not constitutionally required, it is not recommended by our own constitution. The First Lady with her position and status should not be involved in the work of the government. It is a disservice to the government and the people of Nigeria."

## Tanker fire: Death toll rises to 130

### • Doctors struggle to save survivors

**T**HE death toll in Thursday's fire disaster yesterday rose to 130 from the initial 100 with medical workers in Port Harcourt continuing to struggle to save the survivors.

Over 40 critically injured survivors rushed to the Ahoada General Hospital and other medical centres in Port Harcourt soon after the fire outbreak were said to have died yesterday morning.

At the Ahoada General Hospital, 24 of the victims died between midnight and the early hours of yesterday.

A staff of the hospital said they did everything they could to save the victims but their conditions were hopeless.

"Between last night (Thursday) and this morning (Friday) 24 persons have died. It is so painful seeing all our efforts come to nought because of the critical nature of the wounds. The degrees of the burns were severe," he said.

The Rivers State Commissioner for Health, Dr. Sampson Parker spoke in the same vein.

■ Bisi OLANIYI agency reports ■

He said survivors were dying every 10 minutes in spite of spirited efforts by medical personnel to save them.

"It is the worst scene I've ever seen in my experience as a medical doctor," he said.

His Special Duties counterpart, Mr. Emeka Wogu said over 70 per cent of the hospitalised victims may not survive. His assessment was based on the conditions of the victims at Ahoada General Hospital.

Relatives of those who were engulfed in flames while scooping fuel from an overturned tanker flocked to area hospitals and found family members who were hardly recognisable.

Sade Orisola said she received a call to say that her brother was among those burned in the inferno near Ahoada on the East/West Road, in Rivers State.

"When I got to the hospital, I

met a different person wrapped under a huge bandage," she told reporters as she sobbed outside the Federal Medical Centre in Yenagoa, capital of neighbouring Bayelsa State.

"Can that be my brother?" is what I asked."

The severely burned survivors were rushed to several hospitals as medical workers were struggling to come to terms with the high of casualty figure.

"What I can tell you is that we are still losing people," Rivers State Information Commissioner, Ibim Semenitari said.

"In one of the hospitals where we had 13 wounded, four people had died," she added.

More fatalities were feared at two other hospitals and the state plans to release a final toll on Monday," Semenitari explained.

Medical workers at the hospital in Yenagoa who requested anonymity said they were not equipped to care for victims

with such high degree burns.

The tragedy happened after the tanker swerved to avoid three oncoming vehicles.

Semenitari said that the toll could have been much higher had the fire occurred closer to the town of Ahoada, as even more people may have rushed to the scene to collect the fuel spilling out of the toppled truck.

"In a way, we may have been fortunate," she said.

Governor Chibuike Amaechi has ordered a full probe into the causes of the crash.

Some residents of the area said the poor state of the road was partly to blame, but the Sector Commander of the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC), Mr. Kayode Olagunju said such speculation was premature.

He disagreed with the state Commissioner for Health, Dr. Sampson Parker who on Thursday put the death toll at about 200.

He said: "I think this is the worst single disaster that has happened in Nigeria. The corpses I counted there (at the scene) alone, were in fact, 200 and they have not finished counting. It is cremation. The corpses were burnt to ashes. So, how many can you count? It is a sad situation. Quite a pity!"

"Most of the victims had over 70 degree burns. It will be difficult to save them. If they did not go to scoop the fuel, the situ-

ation would have been saved. We heard that over 50 victims were taken to hospitals. Fire fighters' response should not be blamed."

Disputing the Commissioner's figure, Olagunju said: "Rivers State Health Commissioner is not correct (on figure of 200 as dead persons). The bodies were jointly counted by all the agencies: FRSC, NEMA, JTF, Police, Civil Defence and others involved in the rescue."

"Rivers State Health Commissioner was not there when the counting was being done. He only got to the scene and said they (corpses) could be up to 200 and he left. He did not wait for physical counting that we did."

Some residents believe many lives would have been saved if the fire service in the area had been well equipped and the men up to their responsibility.

Mr. Christmas Ede said: "Seven years ago, Rivers State Government promised to build a befitting fire service station at Ahoada Town (headquarters of Ahoada East Local Government Area of the state, but what we have there is nothing to write home about and it is not functioning."

"Immediately the tanker fell at 6:30 am (beside Oando filling station), we contacted the fire service in Port Harcourt, but an unmarked Mercedes Benz truck, with Ateco 1325 inscribed on it, got to the scene at 12:02 pm, when the deed had been done."

## Lagos, Supreme Court, others to kick-start Judiciary Technology Policy

■ Kamarudeen OGUNDELE, Abuja ■

**T**HE Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal and the Lagos State High Court are among the 12 pilot courts to implement the Nigerian Judiciary Information Technology Policy Document.

Launching the policy document in Abuja, the outgoing Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN), Dahiru Musdapher said it will fast-track trials and ensure speedy justice delivery.

The other pilot courts are the Federal High Court, the National Industrial Court, the FCT High Court, Bayelsa State High Court, Borno State High Court, Ebonyi State High Court, Enugu State High Court, Kaduna State High Court and Kogi State High Court.

The document was prepared by committee of eminent judicial and non-judicial officers chaired by the Chief Judge of Borno State, Kashim Zannah.

The document entails comprehensive, pragmatic IT Policy which could be effectively implemented in all jurisdictions and serve as a blue-print to integrate, propel and mainstream IT in the Nigerian judiciary.

According to Justice Zannah, the policy derives from experiences all over the world, aimed at serving our peculiar circumstances.

"It comprises the A-Z of the requirements of introducing and sustaining court technology, like planning, infrastructural requirements, acquisition and maintenance of hard and software, assets, processes and benefits management, budgeting, security, IT audit and capacity building etc."

## Group warns against deploying southern corps members to North

### • Calls for SNC

**T**HE Southern Nigeria Peoples Assembly has called for the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to address the problems militating against the growth and unity of the country.

In a two-page communiqué read by Mr. Ledum Mitee at Le Meridien Hotel and Golf Resort, Uyo, the participants warned against posting of graduates from the southern part of the country to serve the compulsory one-year National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in the volatile and life-threatening areas of the North.

"That until the security situation in volatile and life-threatening areas of the country improves, we insist that none of our youths should be posted to serve the compulsory one-year national service in any part of these volatile and life-threatening areas in the North," the communiqué stated.

It called on Mr. President not to hesitate in ridding his government and the nation's security forces of all persons of dubious loyalty and to treat the activities of Boko Haram

sect as treason and apply the relevant laws on the culprits and their sponsors.

The communiqué urged President Goodluck Jonathan and other organs of government, especially the judiciary to firmly prosecute the war against corruption without fear or favour, with no sacred cow spared, to serve as a deterrent to others, saying: "In particular, government should fast-track the prosecution of all those identified as culprits in the probe reports. In order to reposition the country for the attainment of Vision 20:20:20, the leadership must sanitise the economy of fraudsters and economic saboteurs."

The communiqué also noted that "That the six geopolitical zone structure should be formalized and reflected in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The quarterly conference is scheduled to be hosted by the South East."

The communiqué re-affirmed its commitment to cooperate and work with Presi-

dent Goodluck Jonathan and thanked the people and government of Akwa Ibom for hosting the conference.

It, however, deplored the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria as amended, arguing that it was standing on a faulty foundation and does not guarantee true federalism required for stability and development of the country.

The communiqué was signed by Chief Edwin Clark, leader of South-South; Rt. Rev. Bolanle Gbonigi, leader, South-West and Chief Mbazulike Amaechi, leader, South-East.

Earlier, Governor Godswill Akpabio, represented by his deputy, Mr. Nsima Ekere had condemned the insecurity in the country, blaming it on insincerity of some northern leaders.

Governor Akpabio thanked the Southern elders and leaders for waking up to the clarion call to build their country and called for unity among them for the assembly to realize its goals and aspirations.