

30 die in Port Harcourt vessel explosion

A FRESH tragedy hit Rivers State yesterday, barely a week after the tanker explosion claimed close to 200 lives.

The latest incident is the explosion of a vessel leaving 30 passengers dead.

Three persons were injured and three other vessels were badly burnt.

The tragic scene was the Abuloma Jetty, Port Harcourt.

The ill-fated vessel, according to a source, belonged to a private company contracted to supply food and sundry items to off-shore employees of an oil company.

It was found to be leaking and a group of welders was engaged to seal the leaking points.

It was gathered that the welders were on the job when the explosion occurred.

An eye witness said: "One of the welders was blown off by the explosion. He landed in the fire and died on the spot."

In the ensuing confusion, three of those in the vessel jumped into the river, despite their injuries, in a bid to swim to safety. They were rescued by sympathisers and rushed to the hospital, although two of them were said to be in critical conditions.

There are fears that no other persons escaped.

Most of the dead, a source said, were girls whose mission in the vessel was not immediately known.

The owner of the vessel also could not be ascertained at press time.

The Rivers State Sector Commander of the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC), Dr. Kayode Olagunju, said of the

•Three escape with injuries •Other boats badly burnt •JTF sets five fuel tankers ablaze

Multi-million naira equipment lost as fire guts newspaper house

THE Rivers State Government-owned *The Tide* newspaper's corporate head office at Mile One, Diobu, Port Harcourt, was in

the early hours of yesterday razed, with ten new computers, office equipment, items of furniture and other valuables worth millions of naira razed.

The office of the newspaper's General Manager, Celestine Ogolo, was completely burnt by the fire which started about 2 am, on the second floor of the two-storey building. Over ten airconditioners, refrigerators, ceiling fans and other office items were affected.

Besides the general manager's office, the fire also affected the boardroom, where new sets of furniture had just been moved into; the office of the chairman of the board; audit, credit control and legal departments, as well as the general administration office.

The office of Rivers Fire Service is directly opposite the burnt building, but when the fire fighters arrived, they stood helplessly by the roadside for about 15 minutes, with their equipment unable to put out the raging fire.

It took the intervention of fire fighters from Total Oil Company, for the fire to easily be put out.

The Chairman of the Rivers State Council of the

■ Bisi OLANIYI, Port Harcourt

Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Mr. Opaka Dokubo, declared that the state did not have effective and efficient fire service, even as he called on Rivers government to adequately equip the outfit, for better performance.

It was learnt that the water hose of Rivers government's fire fighters could not get to the first floor of the building, with the firemen running around the expansive premises, without proffering any solution, until their counterparts from Total oil firm arrived, thereby preventing the entire building from being burnt.

It was also gathered that the Total fire fighters stood by the road side, a bit far from the building and effortlessly extended their hose to the last floor, which put an end to the conflagration.

By the time fire fighters from the Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) in Port Harcourt got to the scene, Total firemen had completely put out the fire.

The Rivers State Commissioner for Information and Communications, Ibim Semenitari, and other top Rivers government officials later visited the scene and expressed shock over the incident.

■ Bisi OLANIYI, Port Harcourt

accident: "An oil vessel, at about 9.45 hours caught fire and exploded at the Abuloma Waterfront in Port Harcourt. The fire was still restricted to water area. FRSC, NEMA, Police, Fire Service and others were the rescue agencies on the

ground. Casualty figures not yet known."

The Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) in the state, Deputy Superintendent Ben Ugwuegbulam, did not respond to telephone calls when *The Nation* on Saturday called.

Three other vessels anchored near the burning vessel and other facilities were badly burnt by the raging fire, which

could not immediately be confronted in view of the intensity of the heat.

As the fire raged, men of the Joint Task Force (JTF), code-named Operation Pulo Shield, set ablaze five tankers used by illegal bunkerers for transporting petroleum products. Spokesman for the JTF's Sector 2, Captain Sunny Samuel confirmed the burning.