



•The stump of the tree



•Herbert Iheme

# Collapse of 100-yr-old tree

## How we became

cheated death. All our wares were destroyed by the tree and now, we don't know where to start from. I don't know when we are going to recover from this'.

Another survivor, 12-year-old Chidera Nwaiwu, a Junior Secondary School (JSS) 1 student of Holiness Envangelist Secondary School, Mbieri, whose two legs were crushed by the tree, could not muster enough energy to speak. When our reporter visited him at a native orthopaedic centre where he was rushed to by his widowed mother, his legs were wrapped with POP by the herbalist who assured that he would walk again.

The mother, Mrs Chinyere Nwaiwu, who spoke amidst tears, narrated: "We were coming back from church that evening when I sent my son (victim) to buy tomatoes that we were to use to prepare dinner. While waiting for him about two poles away from the market, I heard a loud noise and people started running helter skelter; behold the huge tree has fallen!"

# How we became orphans overnight

## —Seven siblings who lost both parents

### • Survivors relive evening of horror

ONE week after an ancestral tree fell on top of traders in Umudagu Mbieri community in Mbaitoli Council Area of Imo State, the once bubbling community is still enveloped in shock and grief over the gruesome death of more than 31 people in the incident.

The gigantic tree, which was said to be over 100 years old, was uprooted by windstorm last week Thursday at about 7pm in the evening while market women were packing up their wares to escape the evening rain.

The list of the victims is endless as their tales were terrifying. Painting a graphic detail of how she escaped death by whiskers, 22-year-Okoro Adaoma, who sells tomatoes at the evening market, said she fell severally while trying to run away from under the falling tree.

Adaoma, who broke her wrist, recounted that on that fateful day, "I came to the

market like every other day, without any inkling that the huge Ukwu Uko would fall. It was around 6.30pm that we noticed a strong wind and the sky turned cloudy. So, we were all hurrying to pack up our wares

to avoid the approaching rain when suddenly the tree was uprooted and it fell on top of the people and there was stampede everywhere".

According to her, "my mother was also selling in the market but she was not in the market that day and that was how she

"I saw my elder brother that morning before he went out for his *okada* work and in the evening when the rain was about to fall, he went to the market to assist his wife who sold foodstuffs in the Ukwu Uko market pack up her commodities when the tree fell on them, killing them instantly

narrated: "We were coming back from church that evening when I sent my son (victim) to buy tomatoes that we were to use to prepare dinner. While waiting for him about two poles away from the market, I heard a loud noise and people started running helter skelter; behold the huge tree has fallen!"

She added: "Immediately, I rushed to the place and could not find my son. I started shouting and throwing myself on the ground and searching frantically for him. There were blood chilling cries from people who were trapped under the tree but the size of the tree made it difficult to rescue most of them.

"At last, my son was spotted beneath one of the huge branches which fell on top of his legs, resulting in multiple fractures on both legs. He had already fainted and was also bleeding when we rushed him to a General Hospital where he was revived but because I cannot afford the money, I brought him to this native hospital."

She said that though the young boy was responding to treatment but was always crying and asking to be taken to the school. "Each time I see my boy being carried instead of walking on his own, I feel so bad. I am using this medium to appeal to public-spirited Nigerians to come to my aid because I cannot raise the N200,000 charged for the treatment of my son and his father died some years ago when he was still small. Please, let Nigerians help me save my son."

For Miss Blessing Iheme, an auxiliary nurse and her seven other siblings who lost their parents, Mr and Mrs Godfrey Iheme, in the incident, life will never be the same again.

Reliving her last moment with her late mother, Mrs Richeal Iheme, the fair-skinned lady, who works with a private hospital, said: "That day, I was on night shift and did not go to work until about



•Blessing Iheme...we're now orphans

•Ugorji

•Adanma

6pm and when I was leaving the house, I instinctively decided to go through the market to inform my mother that I was going to work; little did I know that I was seeing her for the last time."

Blessing, who spoke for her other siblings, continued: "On getting to the market, my mother asked me to hurry up so that I could get to the hospital before the rain. About one hour later, I was called up that we had an emergency, that the huge...



to bury my wife. I want the government to assist me, especially to bury my wife. I didn't foresee anything like this. I don't know what life is going to be without my wife".

Meanwhile, the community is facing a new challenge as the fear of possible breakout of epidemic has forced many of them living close to the scene of the incident to relocate to avoid further danger.

During his visit to the community, Governor Rochas Okorocha promised to give financial assistance to the relatives of

rain. About one hour later, that we had an emergency, that the huge Ukwu Uko had fallen. On hearing that, I rushed down to the market to ask after my mother. I didn't even know that my father, Mr. Godfrey Iheme, was also killed.

"After running around the tree stump, I went home and was told that my father's body had been recovered but they were yet to know the whereabouts of my mother and immediately, we went to the Federal Medical Centre where most of the wounded were admitted but she was not there. We checked their morgue and could not find her until we got to Aladinmma Hospital mortuary where we saw her body. That was how we became orphans overnight".

Also speaking at the family compound where series of meetings on the burial arrangement of the couple were ongoing, immediate younger brother to the late Godfrey and a staff of the Imo State House of Assembly, Herbert Iheme, said: "I saw my elder brother that morning before he went out for his *okada* work and in the evening when the rain was about to fall, he went to the market to assist his wife who sold foodstuffs in the Ukwu Uko market pack up her commodities when the tree fell on them killing them instantly".

**A**CCORDING to Herbert, who is also the chief mourner, "I don't know what to do; the immediate problem is how to bury the couple and we need assistance from well-meaning Nigerians and the government, now and after the burial, to assist the children of my late brother who are still very young and are in school".

Another touching case was the plight of Mr. Uche Ugorji; he is yet to come to terms with the sudden and terrific death of his 28-year-old wife, who left behind a year old baby.

According to the bereaved Uche, who lives about three poles away from the huge tree, "my wife went to the market to buy a few things for the evening meal and just a few minutes after she left, there was confusion everywhere and people were running in several directions and shouting that the tree had fallen. I started calling my wife's phone. It was ringing endlessly without response.

"So, I rushed down to the market and called her number again. The phone was ringing under the trunk of the huge tree. She was found later where she was pinned down by metal tables under the tree; we rushed her to the FMC where she eventually died".



•Chidera on his hospital bed

Narrating his ordeal in the hospital, he said they were forced to pay about N13,000.00, even though nothing much was done before his wife was confirmed dead. "After my wife died, the hospital management seized the corpse of my wife and said they would not release it until I

paid up all their charges; I left her remains there and went to look for money".

He added in between tears: "It was after the payment that they released her corpse and it has been deposited at Aladinmma Hospital Mortuary. I am now confused because I don't know how to raise money

My wife went to the market to buy a few things for the evening meal and just a few minutes after she left, there was confusion everywhere... So, I rushed down to the market and called her number again. The phone was ringing under the trunk of the huge tree. She was found later where she was pinned down by metal tables under the tree; we rushed her to the FMC where she eventually died

Governor Rochas Okorocha promised to give financial assistance to the relatives of the victims to cushion the devastating effect of the accident, but the villagers told our reporter that they were still expecting the promise.

A youth leader, Mr. Chidi Ayozie, appealed to the government to remove the stumps of the tree that has been cut to pieces to help the people forget the ugly incident. "The stumps are a sad reminder of the incident and government should have by now cleaned up the scene and fumigated the area to avoid looming epidemic because area is contaminated".

Ayozie called on the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA) to come to the aid of the people.

**"W**HEN an incident that was not as devastating as this happened in Anambra, the Ezu River tragedy, the state government and other wealthy indigenes of Anambra State and politicians responded to the need of the people but today, bodies of the victims rejected by private morgues because of money are decomposing as they could not be buried without money.

"The community is in dire need of assistance for the victims; it should not end at mere visit by the governor and political statements but words should be marched with corresponding action without further delay. Some of the survivors with life-threatening injuries should be assisted to access quality medical treatment; those seized by hospital managements should be assisted to pay up their bills and discharged", he fumed.

However some of the villagers, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, confirmed that government officials have been collating the figures and data of the victims, both the dead and survivors, for possible assistance. They urged the state government to speed up the process to mitigate the emotional trauma the people are currently facing.

Also, the former Speaker of Imo State House of Assembly, Rt. Hon. Kelechi Nwagu, has called on the state government to declare a day of mourning for those who lost their lives in the incident.

Nwagu, who is an indigene of the community, also appealed to corporate, religious and other interventionist agencies to come to the aid of the people, noting that government alone can't give succour to the community in this trying period.