

NIGER DELTA REPORT

Deathtrap called Rumuolumeni

Piqued by the perceived insensitivity on the part of government over the plight of members of Rumuolumeni/Rumuepirikom/Iwofe communities as a result of the dilapidated state of the single-lane road, youths of the communities took to the street to protest government's negligence. ROSEMARY NWISI reports.

OUTHS of Rumuolumeni community in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State recently blocked the ever-busy Rumuolumeni/Rumuepirikom/Iwofe Road from all forms of vehicular movement to protest the continuous deterioration of the road.

The demonstration, which lasted for almost two weeks, was meant to attract governments' attention to the very poor state of the road which they claimed have been neglected by the state government.

The youth, numbering over 100, mounted blocks along the road on daily basis to ensure no vehicle goes in or out of the single-lane road to several petroleum tank farms, Eagle Cement factory, Nigerian Naval Base, and the Ignatius Ajuru, University of Education.

They chanted different songs to express their disappointments at the government, the Monier Construction Company (MCC) which is the contractor purportedly handling the rehabilitation of the road.

The youth accused Governor Rotimi Amaechi of abandoning the community (Rumuolumeni) and those indigenous to it after they had overwhelming-

ly supported him during the 2011 general elections.

They insisted on blocking the road to avoid vehicular movement until MCC returns to site.

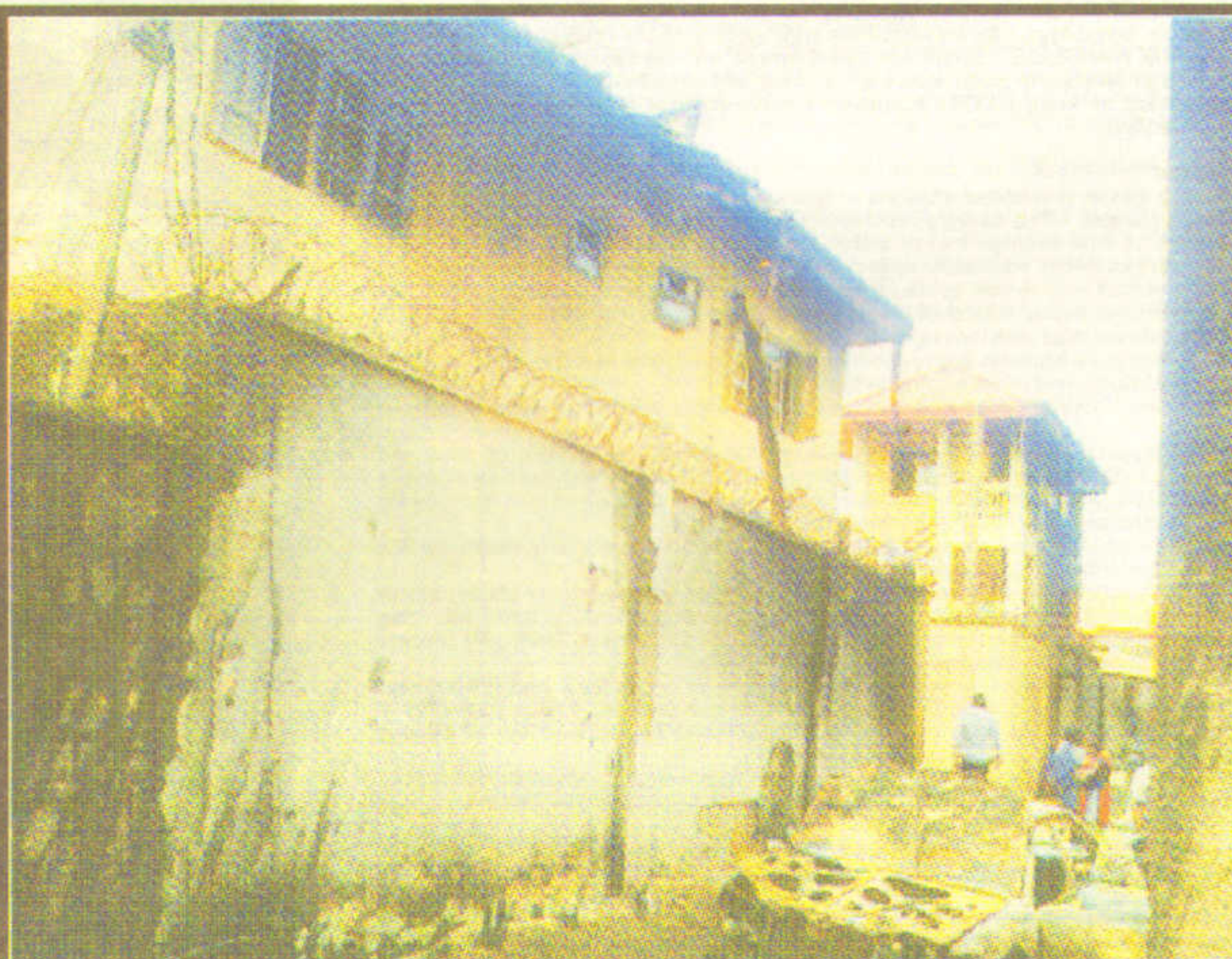
However, the state government, through the Commissioner for Works, Victor Giadom, intervened by appealing to the protesting youths to stop the protest and dismantle the road blocks as dialogue with government continues.

Giadom reportedly promised immediate remedial works on the road; especially the most horrible spots to allow for easy movement pending when the issues delaying the main work would be addressed.

The Commissioner for Works, however, gave approval to companies operating in the area to begin rehabilitation of internal roads in the community as requested by the youth to allow movement of their vehicles and men.

Unfortunately, weeks after the promise, no rehabilitation work had begun on the road. Instead, the situation of the road is getting worse.

Last week, a fuel-laden tanker from one of the tank farms at Rumuolumeni lost its control and fell at the Paragon



• Activists at an oil spill scene



• Mkpee

Junction of the road. Its contents emptied on a street adjacent to it. One person lost his life while some others received various degrees of burning in the incident.

No fewer than four vehicles were burnt. Several shops, houses and electric poles were also burnt.

Eye witness said after the fuel-laden tanker fell; fuel spilled into the street. The product surged far and burst into flames on getting to where a woman was frying bean cake (akara).

While the fire raged, a motorist suspected to be an engineer working for one of the companies at Iwofe was driving along the road when he noticed the fire. Suspecting danger, he jumped out of the car ran for safety. He, however, rushed back to apparently save some official documents. In the process, he was burnt to death.

According to our source, the explosion from his car affected a close by storey building and razed.

Although there was no casualty, a maid who tried to escape from the burning house by jumping down from the

balcony of one of the storey buildings in the premises out of fear was injured and hospitalised.

Residents and road users blamed the poor state of the road for the incident, even as they appealed for assistance from state government.

They also expressed displeasure on the failure of Governor Amaechi to visit the scene of the incident and families of the victims.

In a chat with Niger Delta Report, a resident of one of the houses torched who simply identified himself as Wajino said: "I was inside the house. It was my boss who noticed the fire first because he was standing at the balcony of our apartment."

"When he saw the fire coming, he ran into the house and asked us to carry the three children. Shortly after, we rushed out of the house. The car that was parked close to this compound immediately exploded and the fire went upwards onto the roof of one of the buildings in the compound. The entire compound was covered by thick smoke."

"We later discovered that what we thought was water as

it spilled the entire area was fuel, after all."

"People keep saying it was diesel. They were not there when the incident happened; but I saw it, perceived the odour and moreover, it is only fuel that can wreak the kind of havoc it did. If it was to be diesel, the fire would have been minimal."

He, however, expressed gratitude to God for saving them from the incident, adding: "In all, we give God the glory because what happened could have been worse. This happened between 7:30 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. when most people were still awake. Assuming it happened when we had slept, waking up and trying to escape with sleepy eyes trying to wade through the thick smoke and raging fire, it would have been more tragic."

"The government should understand that what the poor need are basic infrastructure like light, water and good access roads, among others. As you can see, the fuel-laden tanker fell because the road is in a terrible shape."

"Heavy duty vehicles ply this road from morning to morning. The government

should come to our aid by rehabilitating this road so that these avoidable accidents could be prevented. This would also save the people from unnecessary deaths."

"I am not also happy that since after the incident, Governor Amaechi has not considered it worthwhile to visit the scene or extend his condolences to the community and the bereaved families."

"Human beings like him died in those incidents; innocent and law-abiding citizens that were returning from work. If government is alive to its responsibilities and had fixed the road before it deteriorates to this extent, the tanker would not have fallen and the men would not have died," he said.

Reacting, the spokesman of the youth of the community, Felix Chinda said: "I and other youths were at the Saint John area of the community when we heard about the fallen tanker with petroleum products. Before we got to the Paragon Junction; the scene of accident, the tanker was already on fire."

Before this time, we have been talking and appealing to

-Iwofe Road



• Mkpee

government on the need to make this road motorable and passable.

"This road is so bad that even pedestrians find it difficult to pass through it. Every day, we witness several accidents involving tankers on this road."

"It is unfortunate that the government is not concerned about the plight of the people. We are tax-paying citizens. We are pained that we are left alone to our fate. What you have seen here is a child's play. When you get to Big Tree area where the community has its market, you will see a worse situation."

Four vehicles were burnt. Shops and people's other means of livelihood were burnt. At this time of the year, a 33-transmission line was caught off from the electric poles while no fewer than 10 poles were damaged by the fire. Two different storey buildings and a bungalow were torched and several fences were damaged, among others.

"We are still appealing to the state government to come to our help. After the youth of the area blocked the roads preventing any form of vehicular

movements, the Ministry of Works met with companies in the area. Government promised to direct the MCC, the contractor handling the project to come up with a palliative measure pending when serious construction work will be carried out on the road. Unfortunately, three weeks after the protest, neither the government nor MCC has shown any sign of seriousness to commence work on the road."

"Governments are getting a lot of revenues from companies operating here every month, yet the companies have no access to their businesses as a result of the state of the roads. They companies are crying, residents are lamenting, farmers are worst hit as their farm products cannot be conveyed to the places they are needed."

Also commenting, the chairman of the youth organisation, Noble Nnamdi Oluegele appealed to government to look into the people's plight.

"Both the federal and state governments have investment in Rumuolumeni. The community also hosts the Nigeria Naval Base; the University of Education and the renowned Eagle Cement factory, among

others."

Mike Okonkwo, a road user whose vehicle sunk at the bad spot at Big Tree expressed sadness on the state of the road and called on the government to fix the road.

"We are not happy over the dilapidated state of this road. I have been here since two days; there is no road to pass through. Yet, we are conveying products as dangerous as PMS (fuel), on a road like this."

"We are appealing to government to fix the road to avoid unnecessary loss of lives and property," he said.

Members of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and the state government are trading blames on what cause the unfortunate incident.

While NUPENG blamed the poor state of the road for the incident, the government said it was caused by tankers that are not road worthy that were used to convey petroleum products.

Efforts to reach the Commissioner for Works and the officials of the MCC for comments failed. Their telephone contacts were not available as at press time.