

Death by live wire: Nigerians groan as avoidable electrocution cases become frequent

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•*Why they happen –NERC chair*

In what looks like an annual sacrifice that must be offered to please the gods, the lives of many promising Nigerians appeared to have been wasted on the altars of faulty live electricity cables over the years. From the north, south, east and west, the invidious development has remorselessly brought indelible sorrows and devastation to many homes, as it has callously been responsible for sending many bread winners, mothers and children to their early graves.

Unfortunately, findings showed that a good number of the victims and their embattled families are always left to foot the bill of the treatment without any support from the various electricity companies. It was gathered that some families on many occasions resort to selling their landed properties and other valuables, including borrowing to pay hospital bills.

No fewer than 200 victims were said to have been killed in recent times by the ugly development. Consequently, a total overhaul of the sector has been called for by human rights activists to address the problem.

Endless list of calamities

Early in September 2015, the dream of the family of Chief Basil Anekwe of witnessing the graduation of their daughter, Oluchi, a 300-level first-class student of the University of Lagos, Akoka, Yaba, was shattered after she was reportedly electrocuted by a high-tension wire said to have snapped and fallen on her.

She was said to have died few minutes after she was rushed to the medical centre within the school premises.

The deceased, an undergraduate in the Department of Accounting, was said to be returning from an evening Mass with her younger sister at about 7pm when the incident occurred.

The family, it was gathered, has since been seriously devastated by the incident.

The stupefied father said: “ I called my lawyer and he agreed to accompany me to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, LUTH, to see my daughter. But instead of going to the emergency unit, he and the doctor led me to the morgue. When I asked why, nobody said a word to me. Rather, they showed me my daughter’s dead body.

“At that moment, I wanted God’s miracle to happen. Her left hand was stiff on her chest. I commanded

her to wake up but she refused to wake up. I even opened her eyes but they closed back again. She never breathed again. My tallest is gone without giving me a signal that she was going to die.”

Prior to Oluchi’s electrocution, a worker of one of the electricity distribution companies in Lagos State was reported to have been electrocuted in front of the Police College, Ikeja, Lagos. He was said to be carrying out his official duty when the incident occurred.

Later in the month, a similar calamity reared its ugly head in Benue State when an unidentified teenager was electrocuted to death at Vanapo Hotel junction in Otukpo area of the state.

The deceased was said to be riding a motorcycle with two others to an abattoir when they got stuck in a pool of water by an electric pole that was poorly insulated. They were said to have fallen into the water. His two passengers escaped unscathed, while he was trapped and killed in the process.

A number of families were equally plunged into sorrow across the country in 2014 by calamities caused by snapped live wires. No fewer than four people were killed in Lagos State alone during the year in separate incidents. Two of the victims were killed at Hotel bus stop, along LASU/ Isheri road, a suburb of Lagos State after a live wire fell on them. Several others narrowly escaped death in the incident.

The victims, a commercial motorcycle operator and a newspaper vendor, were identified as Omoniyi Ajele and Bola Masika respectively.

Omoniyi was said to have been electrocuted trying to rescue Bola and her child, Mojisola, who were trapped by live wire that snapped from the pole.

Kayode Alomona, a survivor of the incident, who spoke with The Nation gave a detailed account of how it happened thus: “I was standing here at our park when there was a spark on the live wire. Everybody started to run to avoid the impending danger. As they were running, one girl fell on one side. The mother also fell on another side. Immediately we saw them, we ran to assist them. We ran around to get spoon and salt. We put these in their mouths to prevent them from closing their teeth together. We were on this for about 15 minutes. All along we didn’t know that it was electricity shock that made them to fall. As we continued to battle with how to revive them, we suddenly felt a strong electric pull that lifted us from that spot and threw us violently to the other side of the road. The rest of us narrowly escaped death but Omoniyi was not so lucky. He died immediately.”

Another survivor, who identified himself as Olaleye Olakanmi, blamed the Ikeja Electricity Distribution Company for the incident. He said that the calamity would have been averted if they had not restored power supply when they were attending to the victims. He said: “The power authorities obviously cut the power supply after they noticed that a high tension wire had cut from the pole. There was no power supply when we were attending to the girl and her mother. In the course of attending to them, power supply was suddenly restored. Every one of us that was on that spot was badly affected because the whole place was electrically charged.”

Before the incident, two young men, Afeez and Prince Onyekachi, had their bodies severely burnt in another live wire incident. The incident occurred along Igando/ Ikotun road in Alimosho Local Government Area of Lagos State. They were reported to be driving when the incident occurred. In the course of trying to escape from the impending danger, they stepped on the live wire and were severely burnt. Afeez was burnt from the navel down to his two legs, while Prince’s right leg and his manhood were affected in the accident. Afeez later died while Onyekachi narrowly survived. He was amputated.

The sister of the deceased told our correspondent that they have lost both ways. “We lost my brother and also all the money we spent on him. We sold everything and went borrowing to pay his bills. We have not been able to repay all the money we borrowed. We didn’t get any support from the power company in charge of the area in spite of our cries. The challenge we have right now is that the people we borrowed money from are breathing down our necks. Unfortunately, we lack the means of repaying,” she said.

A mother and her three-year-old son were also reported to have been electrocuted in Lessel community in Ushongo Local Government Area of Benue State recently.

The deceased mother and child, whose names were given as Ngwasen Kor and Terwase Kor respectively, were electrocuted in a bush in the community which is the headquarters of Ushongo Local Government.

According to eyewitness account, the three-year-old toddler had gone to defecate in the bush, when he suddenly held a live electricity cable that had been pulled down by rainstorm the previous night.

The toddler, who was instantly electrocuted, gave a loud scream, which attracted his mother who was standing afar off.

Unknown to her that her son had been electrocuted, the confused mother rushed to where the child was and held him. She also got electrocuted.

The menace which appears intractable compounded the woes of mourners in Nnanka, Anambra State when six people were electrocuted by a 33kv high tension wire.

The incident was said to have occurred when the victims were erecting canopies for the burial ceremony of a deceased member of the community.

An eyewitness, Mr Julius Ezeogbo, narrated that: “The people had set the canopy, and thereafter wanted to shift it to the other end so that it could be in line. Immediately they lifted it up in order to carry it over to where it was supposed to be, it touched the EEDC high tension wire and six of them were electrocuted.”

It was gathered that one of the victims, identified as Chekwube, who died on the spot, was preparing to pay the bride price of his heartthrob before he was sent to his early grave.

In July 2014, the tragedy swept up north when a 20-year old man, Duguri Muhammad was electrocuted in Zai Quarters of Dutse Local Government Area of Jigawa State.

Tears flowed in torrents among residents of Aladelola Street in Ketu, area of Lagos State when two members of the community were untimely killed by a high-tension cable. The deceased, Yekini Osijirin and Garba Memuna, were killed after the wire fell on them.

In April 2013, live wire wreaked another havoc at Onabanjo Street in the Oworonshoki area of Lagos State. Five people, including a pregnant woman, Mrs Ameh, her three-year-old daughter, Favour, another female resident simply identified as Iya Fatimah, her daughter and a boy, Basit, were electrocuted by a live wire that fell during a rainstorm.

Twice in 2012, the ancient city of Ibadan, the Oyo State capital recorded fatalities resulting from live wire incidents. Nine people were reportedly killed in the separate incidents. Seven of the victims were said to have died at Apata-Ganga area of the state after a high-tension live cable fell on them. An expectant mum and a nursing mother were said to be among the victims.

Two unidentified people suspected to be contract staff of the Power Holding Nigeria Company (PHCN) were also electrocuted in August while trying to rectify electrical fault in Eleyele area, of the state.

The years 2011 and 2010 did not also end without reports of such despicable incidents. 2011 witnessed the electrocution of a medical doctor and four others in Oba, Anambra State while 2010 recorded the tragic electrocution of no fewer than 20 passengers in Port Harcourt.

A high tension wire belonging to the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) was said to have snapped and fallen on two commercial buses, killing the passengers on the spot.

Human rights activists kick

Some human rights activists who spoke with The Nation have however frowned at the spate of the calamities, saying that drastic actions must be taken to avert future occurrences.

Comrade Debo Adeniran, the Executive Director of Coalition Against Corrupt Leaders (CACOL), blamed the incidents on the alleged negligence of agencies and power authorities saying: “It is a reflection of how Nigerian agencies have been. They have not been seen to attach premium to the sanctity of human lives. It is also appalling that successive governments have cared less about the rights of Nigerians to life.

“There should be close monitoring of the facilities to make sure they are always in order. There is nothing the citizens can do to avert the dangers. The authorities should be more diligent and where they fail, they should be severely punished. Now that the business is in the hands of private companies, they should be compelled to compensate the families of victims. It is regrettable that nobody or company has been dealt with since this incidence started occurring. It is time drastic measures are taken to serve as deterrent to others. Defaulters should be made to pay heavily for their failures henceforth.”

His line of thought was also shared by another human rights activists, Comrade Ayodele Akele.

He said: “The calamities are caused by bad planning from the very beginning. This kind of incidents are unheard of in developed countries. In civilised cables are buried underground and not in the air as we have it. I don't know where they inherited the system from. The British who colonised us don't have that in their place.

“The entire system must be totally overhauled. It was those people yesterday, it could be the turn of anybody tomorrow. Such calamity doesn't respect anybody. The National Assembly through its

committee on energy should do something about this with immediate effect because the spate of the occurrence is worrisome. There is need for the government to collate the statistics of victims and fashion out ways of getting the concerned authorities to compensate them. The DISCOS and GENCOS cannot shy away from their responsibilities because when they took over the PHCN, they also took over the assets and liabilities.”

The civil liberty organisations, he said, would take up advocacy on the matter to “ make sure that the people that are responsible for this negligence are held responsible. We would also have constitutional and human rights lawyers to sue the companies to court.”

Barrister Fred Agbaje, a constitutional lawyer, said gone were the days that power authorities could not be sued, adding: “The victims can sue for negligence. They can approach the police for criminal prosecution where the incident has caused injury or death. They could also sue for on fundamental human rights ground.

“In the old NEPA act, you cannot sue but under modern jurisprudence, each DISCO is accountable for its action.”

Reacting to the development, the chairman of the National Electricity Regulatory Commission, Dr Sam Amadi, said: “ The incidents are happenstances and when they happen, we always carry out investigation to get to the root cause. We do mete out adequate punishment to erring companies.

“Aside from technical problems, negligence on the part of the people is also responsible for some of these problems. When you have people building houses under high tension wires and other high electricity places, it is very risky. I agree that some of the lines are very weak but it requires huge finances to change them.”

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