



'They were among our finest'

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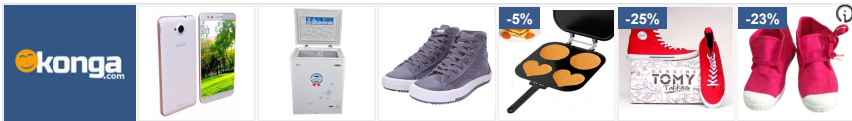
Three University of Benin (UNIBEN) teachers died in an accident that occurred in Abudu village on the Benin-Agbor highway. The accident involved a fuel-laden tanker, a bullion van and passenger vehicles, reports EZEKIEL EFEQBHOKHAN (600-Level Pharmacy).

FOR three days, lectures were suspended at the University of Benin (UNIBEN) last week. It was not because of a crisis, but to mourn the death of three teachers described as some of the institution's "finest".

Prof Lucky Okunrobo, Dr Godwin Joseph and Dr Saturday Idemudia died in an accident in Abudu village on the Benin-Agbor Expressway.

The lecturers were returning from a conference when their vehicle caught fire in the accident involving a fuel tanker, a bullion van and passenger vehicles.

Twenty-two persons were burnt beyond recognition in the accident, which occurred during the diversion of traffic caused by the bullion van, which broke down at a sharp bend on the highway.



The petrol-laden tanker lost control, rammed into the passenger vehicles and exploded.

The late Prof Okunrobo was the Head of Pharmaceutical Chemistry Department, the late Dr Joseph headed Pharmaceutical Microbiology Department, and the late Dr Idemudia was an Assistant Lecturer in the Pharmaceutical Microbiology Department.

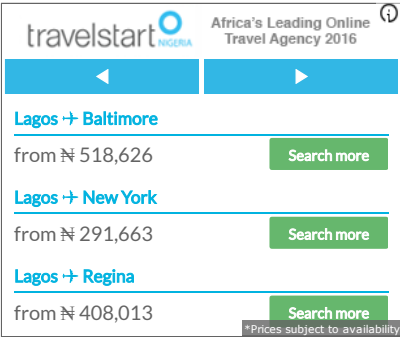
The victims were said to be returning from a Biotechnology conference, held at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) in Awka, the Anambra State capital.

The news of their death hit students like thunderbolt. That fateful day, Pharmacy students had gathered at the Sports Complex to play the Dean's Cup. The 600-Level students were taking on their 400-Level counterparts for the cup. When the news of the lecturers' death broke, the competition was abandoned.

Students broke down in tears as they returned to their hostels. A large crowd, comprising workers and students, gathered at the faculty to mourn the lecturers. Lectures and other activities were cancelled in their honour.

The Pharmaceutical Association of Nigeria Students (PANS) declared a three-day mourning. The students, clad in black, gathered daily to hold procession round the campus to mourn their “finest lecturers”.

Tears flowed as some of them lamented the manner of the lecturers’ death, blaming the policemen guarding the bullion van for the tragedy.



“We are sad because of the tragic manner we lost three of our finest teachers,” PANS president, Andrew Akhabue, said during the rally. He described the death as a “monumental loss” to the faculty, the university and the nation. “Words cannot express our pains and grief. We can only pray to God to rest their souls in perfect peace,” he added.

A student, who claimed to have witnessed the accident, blamed the police for it. The 400-Level student, who simply gave her name as Gladys, said the policemen focused on protecting the money in the bullion van and not on saving the people screaming for help when the tanker burst into flames.

She said: “I was travelling on the road at the time of the accident. I escaped being burnt to death.

We saw the victims screaming for help while their vehicles were on fire, but the policemen attached to the bullion van prevented people from moving close. They concentrated their efforts on protecting the money in the bullion van as they watched people being burnt. The bullion van caused the accident; the policemen could not save any life. Instead, they went after money.”



The students’ procession went to the Administrative Block, where they met with management.

Speaking with the Vice-Chancellor (VC), Prof Osasere Orumwense, and the body of principal officers, Andrew requested for the teachers’ immortalisation. “The lecturers died in the line of duty,” he said.

Prof Orumwense assured the students that their request would be considered by management, noting that the school also declared three lecture-free days in honour of the lecturers.

He said: “We are all saddened by the death of these brilliant lecturers. Dr Joseph was my personal friend. I am still in shock over the manner of their death. We have heard your request and the management would consider all your requests.”

The VC said he led the management team to condole with the family members of the deceased last Wednesday.

In his condolence, National President of the National Fellowship of Christian Pharmacy Students (NFCPS) Emmanuel Nwachukwu said only God could console the bereaved families. He described the lecturers’ death as “irreparable loss” to the school.

Ehidiamen Oloror, a 600-Level student described the late Dr Idemudia as “humble, and lovely”. He said: “I usually call him Dr ID. He was a perfect gentleman, with humility and kindness. He was a reservoir of knowledge. I never thought I would talk about him in past tense as I am doing now. It is so painful to have learnt of his death at this period of his career.”

Onyeka Nwaka, a 400-Level student, said: “Prof Okunrobo was a very simple lecturer. When I heard about the incident, I prayed it should not be him. But, when I saw his picture, I was shocked. He was a nice and easygoing man. The whole faculty will miss him.”

Felix Uro, a 600-Level student, described the late Dr Joseph as students’ favorite. He said: “Dr Joseph’s class was every student’s favorite. No student likes to be absent at his lecture, because he cracked jokes that made it easy for us to understand the course. This is why some of us cried when we learnt

about the tragedy.”

The late Dr Idemudia was friendly, said David Eneye, a 600-Level student. “Why will such a young lecturer die? Dr Idemudia was an embodiment of knowledge. He would explain over and over again and make sure everyone understood before he would leave the class. He was friendly. I just can’t believe he is dead,” David said.

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