

'People inhaled the gas and got choked to death'

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February 22 will for some time remain a sad day for community in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State. That day, a gas explosion rocked Evekwu and the effects are still being felt. It came from an oil facility. More than 10 people are feared dead. Some of the victims identified by their leaders include, Sarah Obisike, Omevem Ezinwo, Nkesi Wodu, Kingsley Enyadike, Samuel Amadi, James Nzokurum, Uche Ize, Faith Mannewe, Chidi Wekwa and a young lady (name not ascertained).

When the incident first happened in the community, there were confusing reports on what the actual cause of the explosion was and how many casualties recorded. Some said it was only one person that died; others said no death was recorded.

Rivers State Commissioner for Environment Prof. Roseline Konya visited the scene and was quoted as saying that nobody died in the gas explosion because the incident occurred in a forest.

But the communities disagreed with her and noted that two days after the explosion, they discovered four death bodies inside the bush. They also argued that it was not only Evekwu community that was affected by the exposition and that many members of the community are still searching for their relatives who have been declared missing.

The Chairman of Ikwerre Youth Movement (IYM) Emohua chapter, Sir Lucky Worluh, said he was disappointed when he heard that Konya claimed nobody died.

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He said the inability of the owners of the exploded facility to show sympathy to the affected community and the families of the victims was a sign of enslavement and disregard for the pains and the suffering of the people.

Worluh said: "Even a deaf and dumb can disappoint you if you think you can take him or her for granted. What we need now in the affected community is remediation and while that is going on, the companies should send relief materials to the people. God will not forgive those who are seeing white

and calling it black. I don't know what people intend to gain by conniving with oil companies to betray their community.

“The companies and those who are telling them that nobody died in the explosion that has claimed many lives are only beating the drums of war. First, the companies should go there and assess the level of the damage. We want to know what kind of pipe that was buried on the ground, what quality and how long it has stayed there. The companies cannot allow the people to die after polluting their water and the environment. We are only watching, waiting for their next action because I know they will not take our love for peace as weakness.

“When the incident happened, the affected community started running for safety; according to them, when they get to the next community the people in that area also ran away to the other village just like that. That was why we are recording more casualties because a lot of people jumped inside the river, pond and water –well. For those who said nobody died, the affected communities have continued to discover death bodies and many are still missing. We have a culture that those who died were buried in the forest; that is the custom of the area”

Hon. Sam Oge, the lawmaker representing Emohua Constituency in Rivers State House of Assembly, said it was wrong and premature for anyone to give any report concerning the explosion when those investigating the cause of the incident are yet to present their report.

He said he visited the scene and also interacted with the community and the companies but he was not in a position to inform the public if there was casualty or not from the incident.

Oge said: “I visited the scene I also interacted with the community and the companies involved. But outside the requests being made by the community, what I was interested in is the impact assessment and I was meant to understand that there was investigation going on by the agencies that are saddled with such responsibility. Some agencies, including the Ministry of Environment, visited the community. They are supposed to turn in their report as to demonstrate what happened. Of course, I am not aware if the report is ready or not but the companies told me that as soon as the final report of the investigation is out, they will inform me but until now nobody has informed me of anything.”

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On whether there was casualty or not, the lawmaker said: “For me, whatever comment anybody made at that stage was preposterous and premature. In fact, it is irresponsible for anybody to draw any conclusion in respect of the explosion. Look, it was a big sound and people were running helter-skelter to anywhere and whenever they saw people running, they joined. Even police men in the area took cover. I heard that the customary court in the area abandoned their duty and took off.”

A socio-cultural group in the area known as Odegu General Assembly said the death toll has risen to 10. The group said several people in the area have developed different ailments.

Speaking during a protest, the chairman of the group, Mr. Eke Emenike, said: “Observably, the explosion caused a deep panic in the minds of our people who ran for safety, thereby leaving so many people physically injured and myriads of health challenges such as hypertension and sundry respiratory problems. As at today, the dead toll from this incident has risen to 10.

“The walls of so many of our buildings were cracked because of the degree of the vibration; our environment is injected with massive poisonous gaseous substances inimical to human health and so many of our children who fled their homes in panic during the resultant tremor are still missing. The pipeline explosion was a manifestation of the negligence meted against the people of the area.”

He went on: “In spite of the high magnitude of contribution of the kingdom to the earnings of the country, the kingdom and her people are debased, neglected in provision of infrastructure and human capital development. To our dismay, instead of addressing the remediation, vigorous investigation, inspection and clean-up of the polluted environment, NLNG, NNPC, DPR, NAOC and IDSL are in conspiracy to build up a diversionary story on whose gas facility did the explosion erupted from, whose activity is responsible and who should bear the burden.”

The paramount ruler of Rumuji community, Eze Ohna Christian Elechi, said he was disappointed over the behaviour of the operators of the exploded facilities.

Elechi said: “We never knew where to run to. We thank God that this was not a rainy season if not more people would have died. Since this thing happened, we have recorded over nine deaths in the bush. People inhaled the gas and got choked and others who are hypertensive are also in pain. Several people got various degrees of injuries. The government should come to our aid.”

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