

Onitsha tanker fire: death toll now seven

•Buhari commiserates •Traders deny Obiano entry •Fed Govt to provide relief materials

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A LOT has happened since the Wednesday tanker fire in Onitsha, Anambra State in which a woman and her baby initially died, and goods and property razed. It has been revealed that five more people have also died as a result of the blaze, bringing the death toll to seven.

President Muhammadu Buhari has also commiserated with families of those who lost their lives in the fire, and also those who suffered any injuries or losses. The President said he was sad over the death of a mother and her child in the incident.

In a statement by his Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, he said, “I am touched by the sight of the charred remains of an innocent mother and her child who are victims of this tragedy. I also extend my sympathies to other victims of the explosion whose houses, shops and other property were destroyed.

“While I am sad over this tragedy, I must at the same time call for urgent action on the part of those concerned to stem these frequent fatalities on public roads. Safety precautions and routine maintenance are taken for granted by vehicle owners.

“I call on the Ministry of Transport, the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) and other stakeholders to urgently address the issue of safety standards in the country to stem the embarrassing frequency of these tragedies.”

The Federal Government has also said it will provide relief materials for victims of the inferno.

Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, Hajiya Sadiya Umar Farouq said her ministry will work with other relevant agencies to provide the much-needed relief.

Angry traders who lost their goods to the fire yesterday prevented the state governor Willie Obiano from entering the market

The traders at Ochanja Market, who were still counting their losses, blamed the government for their woes. The governor, who visited the commercial city at about 9.20am a day after the fire for assessment of the disaster, only visited Upper Iweka, not the market where the distraught traders sell their wares.

The visibly angry traders, who gathered in their hundreds, said the governor was lucky to have restricted his visit after being informed about their plans.

Obiano was in tears yesterday at the scene of the fire.

Some leaders of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Hon Tony Nwoye, the governorship candidate of the party during the last election and Chief George Moghalu, Managing Director, Nigeria Inland Waterways Authority (NIWA) also called, expressing their emotions.

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Obiano said he would compensate the victims before Christmas.

Also, he said a committee set up by the state government headed by the Deputy Governor Dr Nkem Okeke would visit the areas of the fire on Friday to identify those affected and collect data.

Obiano said he was very sorry for what happened, urging the people to be their brother's keeper. He also pleaded with the victims and residents to remain law-abiding, adding that the state government would revamp and equip the fire service in the state.

"The people and government of Anambra are very sorry for this sad incident," Obiano said. "We will ensure that compensation is paid before Christmas. We will celebrate Christmas in peace. We will resist criminal elements who may seize this sad time to loot and rob. Our spirit will remain strong."

Nwoye said his foundation Tony Nwoye Foundation (TNF) would compensate all the Youth who lost their wares and goods during the inferno.

They said it was not the best time for the people of Anambra State, adding that the incident showed clearly that the present administration in the state was not functioning.

Senators Stella Oduah and Andy Uba equally bemoaned the disaster.

A trader Emeka Amuzie claimed he lost millions of naira to the disaster, and accused the state government of negligence. He wondered how a state like Anambra could not boast of a formidable fire service agency considering the huge amount of money being generated from the state.

He said, "If he's not afraid, let him come to this market and see what we can do. We are ready to confront his security details no matter how daring they may be. We couldn't have lost all these if they had done the needful, but their selfishness will not allow them. All they're interested in is the huge revenue and taxes they collect from us."

The Federal Fire Service (FFS) has told News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) that a mob stopped its men from getting to the scene of the fire.

Spokesperson of the agency, Ugo Huan, said in a statement, "The Federal Fire Service received a call about the fire outbreak around 2.00 pm. The control room at the headquarters in Abuja immediately turned out its nearest station at Asaba, Delta State, to attend to the fire.

“Our men immediately headed to the scene but it was not possible to contend with the heavy traffic at the Niger head bridge, coupled with the behaviour of an angry mob who pelted stones at them. Thus, it was not possible for the firefighters to get to the scene and fight the fire in such a hostile environment.”

Chukwuka Okeke, a neighbour to the woman who died with her baby, described the tragedy as unfortunate but avoidable.

He said, “We were in our shops when I got the call that fire was burning at Upper Iweka. Though we saw smoke going up from a distance, nobody could believe it would extend to this place. For over three hours, we perceived the smell of fuel mixed with gas from the tanker as it flowed through the drainage until the whole thing went up in flames.

“The woman had already rushed out of the shop with her baby when she suddenly went back. But she suddenly slipped and fell inside the gutter which was already in flames.”

Meanwhile, Chairman of Red Cross Society in the state, Prof. Peter Katchy confirmed the death of a man who was burnt to death after being caught up with the fire in his shop upstairs..

“At Ochanja Market, a man was caught up with the fire upstairs and he was burnt to death too.

“Another man who managed to run out from his house but became unconscious was rushed to Menax Hospital by the Red Cross Ambulance.

“There was a lady that jumped down from a one-storey building and sustained bruises in her legs but she was immediately attended to by the Red Cross.

“Others whose shops and properties were damaged including seven Red Cross volunteers were given special psychological First Aid.”