

Anambra fire disaster: Traders count losses, lament loss of millions



• Ozoemenam, lost millions

WEDNESDAY was a sad day for most traders in Ochanja, the commercial district of Onitsha, Anambra State. A tanker fire that occurred at Upper Iweka and spread to the popular Ochanja Market close by claimed many lives and destroyed no fewer than 500 shops.

Even the state governor, Chief Willie Obiano and the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) in charge of the area, Ifeanyi Iburu, would for long remember the day with heavy hearts. Traders at the market yesterday refused the state Governor Obiano entry into the market as they were still very angry over the loss of their goods.

At press time yesterday, the traders were still counting their losses which, according to them, ran into billions of naira as each shop owner claimed to have lost goods worth between 10 and 20 million naira.

The Anambra State Police Command put the number of deaths at seven while many other people sustained various degrees of burns. For his prompt response to the incident, some people nicknamed the state's Commissioner of Police, Mr. John Abang, as a tiger.

Governor Obiano, on visiting the scene on Thursday, broke down in tears. He assured the victims of plans by the state government to compensate them before Christmas.

He, however, could not visit Ochanja Market because the traders were still boiling with anger over the non-availability of fire fighters to put the fire in check because it caused the huge damage.

Among those who died in the fire disaster were a mother and his baby who were said to have slipped into the ball of fire in a gutter in front of their shop.

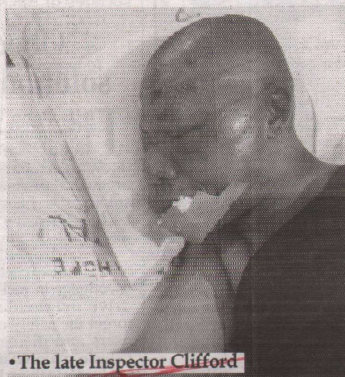
Traders count losses

Speaking with The Nation correspondent amid sobs, one of the affected traders, Osioma Josephine Ozoemenam, said she lost more than N5 million to the fire. The 33-year-old lady, who runs a big restaurant in the area, said she lost everything, adding that her life had become hopeless.

Ozoemenam said the calamity would have been avoided if the fire service in the state was functional.

She said: "My world has ended. All my efforts over the years have come to zero. Where on earth will I get money to start off again?"

"What has happened to me is like the plays we watch in home videos. I still don't believe what has hit me and others in this place. I'm still lost in thought.



• The late Inspector Clifford

■ Nwanosike ONU, Awka ■

"All my drinks, food stuffs, everything is gone in a blink of the eye. I will not curse anyone. God Almighty knows why it happened."

She said the traders needed help from both the state and federal governments to bounce back to life.

"Some of us are like walking corpses and I don't really know how I'm going to come out of this situation," she said.

Another trader, Eneke Amuzie, who claimed to have lost more than N20 million to the disaster, accused the state government of negligence.

He wondered how a state like Anambra could not boast of a formidable fire service agency in spite of the huge revenue being generated from the state.

He said: "If he is 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.

Minister consoles Onitsha fire victims, reassures of FG's support

THE Federal Government yesterday reassured victims of fire incident at the Ochanja Market, Anambra State of its readiness to help them bounce back to life.

Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, Hajia Sadiya Umar-Farouq, gave the assurance in Onitsha during her visit to the market.

She said she was pained at the enormity of losses incurred by the traders as well as the damages caused by the inferno.

She said: "I'm here on behalf of President Muhammadu Buhari to offer our condolences both to your governor and



• The late Nwoye

"We would not have lost all these if they had done the needful, but all they are interested in is the huge revenue and taxes they collect from us."

Particularly pathetic was the case of a woman, Ifeoma Nwoye, a native of Urum in Awka North Local Government Area, who was said to have searched for the fruit of the womb for 16 years but was killed alongside her only child.

Another victim, Chukwuka Okeke, also described the tragedy as unfortunate but avoidable. The trader, who was in tears, said she lost more than N20 million during the inferno.

He said it was not up to 20 minutes he chatted with the deceased (Ifeoma Nwoye) that she was consumed in the inferno.

Okeke 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 more than 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."

Okeke said the woman whose husband also owned a shop in the city, just had the baby early this year after 16 years of marriage.

"She got married in 2003, but just had her first baby early this year. It's really a tragedy. My concern is not just my shop and the goods that I lost but Ifeoma and her baby too," he said.

A Police Inspector at the Central Police Station Onitsha, identified simply as Clifford, was beaten to coma by traders while he was on a rescue mission with his men.

The action of the traders who beat up policemen was described by the Board of Trustees Chairman of Human Rights Defenders (HURIDE), Uzor Dede Uzor, as inhuman and despicable.

Uzor and members of the Human Rights Defenders visited the affected policemen in one of the hospitals in Onitsha to sympathise with them.

Also expressing sadness over the incident, Governor Obiano called on the people to be their brother's keeper in this moment. The governor, who looked sober at the scene of the disaster, pleaded with the victims and residents to remain law abiding.

He said the state government would revamp the fire service in the state and provide more equipment for fire fighting.

Obiano said: "The people and government of Anambra are very sorry for this sad incident. We will ensure that compensation is paid before Christmas. We will celebrate Christmas in peace."

the entire people of the state.

"I've directed the National Emergency Management Agency and the State Emergency management agency to assess the extent of the damage and report back to the President.

"I've directed the SEMA to make available relief materials including food and non food items to the affected population of the market."

She assured that the ministry would work closely with the state "to see how we can prevent further recurrence."

She said a joint committee of federal and state governments would come later to assess the level of damage with a view to forestalling future incidents of

fire outbreak.

Earlier, the Chief of Staff to the state government, Chief Primus Odili, commended the swift response of the Federal Government to the disaster.

Odili, who took the minister round the market in company with NEMA and Red Cross Society officials, requested for fire trucks from the Federal Government to help combat such incidents in the future.

Responding, the Chairman of one of the affected plazas in the market, Ndubis Onuoha, prayed the promises made to them by the federal government would not be diverted.