

Death in Chinese firm

• *There is need to enforce safety standards in workplaces*

FOR Babatunde Abdulrahmon, 17, death came on a day he was supposed to be happy that in a country where unemployment rate is high, he was able to find a place, to at least keep body and soul together. That is the kind of job many Nigerians are compelled to do these days: jobs with salaries that can't take anyone home. But, as some people contend, half bread is better than none. This must have led the young man to accept to work under the most inconducive conditions.

Reports emanating from the Lagos State Safety Commission, which eventually sealed off the Chinese firm that employed Abdulrahmon, point in the direction of a lackadaisical attitude to safety standards on the part of the firm. According to the safety agency's spokesperson, Adewunmi Okoh, "The Lagos State Government has reaffirmed its commitment to the safety of lives and property of the citizens. This assertion was made by the Director-General, Lagos State Safety Commission, Mr Lanre Mojola, while sealing off the Mingy Trading Company Limited, located at No. 11 Ila Orangun Street, Ijegun-Egba, Satellite Town."

Abdulrahmon died in the process of operating some equipment that he was exposed to, without training, on the very first day he assumed duty. Okoh added that "There was also very clear evidence of poor housekeeping, lack of safety signage, poor factory layout for emergency management, very poor recruitment process with no documented training records, poorly installed electric cables and poor record keeping," in the company, all of which must have facilitated Abdulrahmon's death.

It is unfortunate that a promising teenager could have died in such circumstances. It is sadder still that more Nigerians could die in similar circumstances because Mingy Trading Company is not alone in this. Exploitation is rife in

many Chinese and Indian companies operating in Nigeria.

But then, the question to ask is why it took someone's death to bring into focus the monumental disregard for safety standards and rules by the Chinese firm. For sure, its failure to comply with laid-down procedures did not start today. It must have been a long practice, and this is what makes the matter more discomfiting. Perhaps where to begin is to know whether the company is registered with the state government. If it is, it presupposes that some of the agency's personnel must have been going there to inspect its activities. What have their findings been like? Have they ever called its attention to the observed laxities? This is assuming there have been such inspection visits to the company. And, if they have not been visiting the company, they should also explain why.

We are particularly worried because what happened in Mingy Trading Company is more of a recurring decimal in some firms, foreign and local, that exploit the country's deplorable economic situation to employ Nigerians under the most subhuman conditions. Sometime ago, the activities of yet another Chinese firm, Yoyo Resources Recycling Limited Company, that reportedly exposed Orimerunmu, a sleepy community in Ogun State, to environmental hazard, was reported in the media. Also, a 300-level student of the Department of European Studies, University of Ibadan, Richard Gbadebo, died in July, last year, at Henkel Nigeria Ltd. in Ibadan. Gbadebo, 21, reportedly fell into a soap-making machine in the company, while on holiday job during the coronavirus pandemic break.

There are many other cases too numerous to mention.

These avoidable workplace accidents continue to happen because, after the initial tough talks and sealing off of the affected companies'

premises, the firms take a few actions to remedy the situation only for business to continue as usual thereafter.

It is high time these firms operating below standards are made to pay the price for their actions. It is insulting that the Chinese and other foreigners who keep very stringent rules in their own countries find it convenient to sidetrack our own rules and regulations, especially in a matter as serious as workplace safety standards. The point that must be well made is that these companies are not doing Nigerians a favour by operating in the country. They are not here for charity; they are here to make money. But that should not be done at the expense of hapless Nigerians.

Perhaps the place to start applying sanctions stringently is Mingy Trading Company, to serve as deterrence to other companies. Firms operating in Nigeria, whether foreign or local, are to provide jobs, not deaths. There are unavoidable industrial hazards, which like any other accident happen unannounced. But it is unpardonable for firms to be operating with impunity in a country governed by laws. Government officials found complicit in this unfortunate incident should be similarly punished.

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