

INSIDE THE STATES

Ihiala fatal crash: one carnage too many

① Less than two months after a fatal motor accident claimed lives of over 20 persons on Sunday, November 28, 2021 at Ihiala, Anambra State, another ghastly crash occurred on February 18, 2022 near Azia Junction along Onitsha-Owerri Expressway of Ihiala town.

② An articulated truck was said to have rammed into six vehicles at a police checkpoint before crashing into a bus with several passengers on board.

Several lives were reportedly lost while others were injured.

While some attributed both crashes to reckless and careless driving by drivers of articulated vehicles, several others blamed it on numerous Police checkpoints sited along that stretch.

Following the November 28 accident, the House of Representatives had asked the Inspector General of Police, IGP, Usman Baba Alkali to immediately remove all illegal checkpoints across the country.

The resolution was occasioned by a motion by the member representing Ihiala federal constituency of the State, Hon. Ifeanyi Momah at plenary.

The House also mandated the IGP to direct the commissioner of Police in Anambra State to review the location of the police check point in Ihiala with a view to forestalling further occurrence of such disaster especially during the festive season.

Titled "Need to Investigate Loss of so Many Lives Along the Onitsha-Owerri Express Road Within Ihiala Federal Constituency", the motion also urged the military to relocate their checkpoints in the state to the border towns.

Presenting the motion, Momah noted that for over 2 years, military and Police checkpoints in Ihiala Onitsha-Owerri Express Road have been operational to quell insecurity in the area.

He, however, said that road users have since been subjected to devastating, degrading and inhuman treatment occasioned by the operation of the military and Police checkpoints in that area.

He said: "Being a major express road, the negative impact of this military checkpoint has been grave on the community as well as all the road users."

"In this menace, no one is spared, all suffer under the weight of the oppression. Men, women, children are forced to alight from their cars and raise their hands and pass through the checkpoint."

"Nursing and pregnant women are also not spared; in fact, nursing mothers are made to carry their babies up high as they walk across the checkpoint, sometimes being forced to walk for over 1km."

"Very recently, a pregnant woman on a bike was whipped thoroughly at the military checkpoint. Traditional rulers are also stopped and searched in an embarrassing manner including ransacking of their traditional attire."

"The military and police checkpoints are located in the middle of the busiest road in the entire local government area, opposite Abbot Boys Secondary School Ihiala and opposite Ihiala Divisional Police headquarters both located within the same axis, an area that ought not to be associated with a military checkpoint. As is popular knowledge, military checkpoints are to be stationed at border communities."

"This military checkpoint ought to be mounted at Amorka community, which is the border between Ihiala Local Government and Imo State and not its current location which is a commercial hub crammed with markets, businesses, schools, etc."

"The town leaders have also asked that the checkpoint be relocated because of these hazards mentioned above in order to mitigate the calamitous consequences of the current situation. Yet, this dreadful situation persists with no glimmer of hope of improvement."

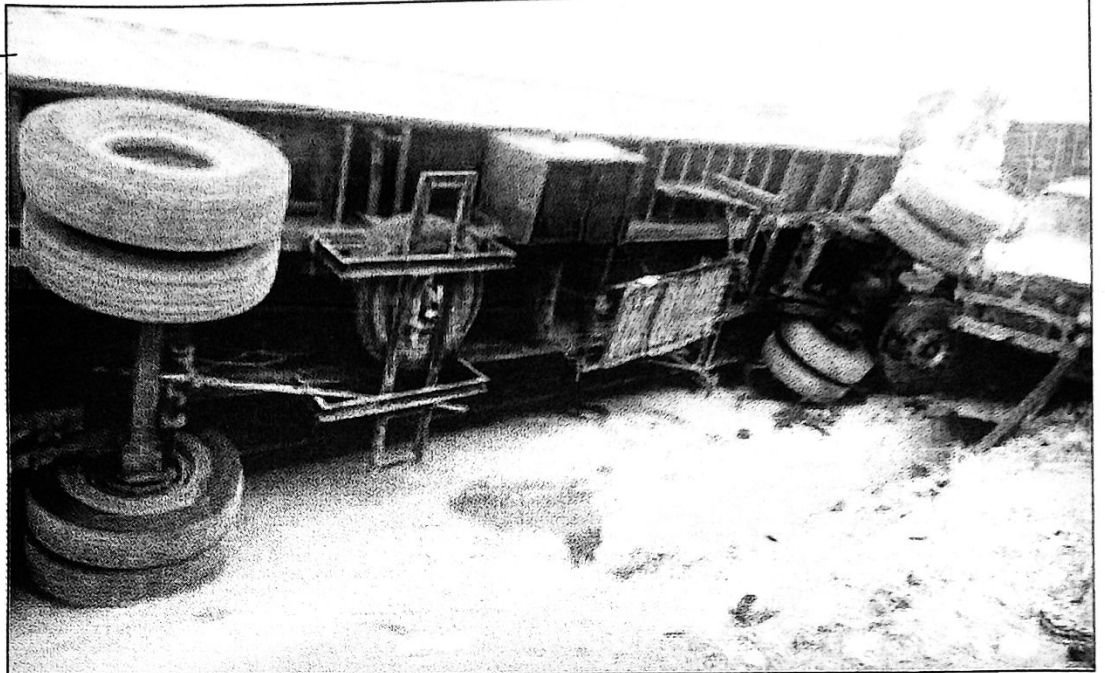
The lawmaker recalled that on Saturday, the 30th day of May 2020, a police makeshift road blockade was the cause of a fatal accident at Ihiala which led to the death of a trailer driver and his conductor as well as over 10 bus passengers.

"On Thursday the 4th day of November 2021 at about 15:50 hours, an accident involving three vehicles on the Onitsha - Owerri Ihiala Road on Sunday, claimed the lives of three (3) children and six (6) adults according to the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) as the driver upon sighting the Police checkpoint, tried to apply brake but couldn't, thus resulting in the fatal accident (according to eye witness)."

"Most recently, on Saturday, the 28th day of November 2021, a trailer carrying a container load of goods ran over twenty (20) public road users who died on the spot", Momah said.

Although Momah noted he was not averse to the mounting of checkpoints, but argued that such checkpoints should not be in a manner that would jeopardize the wellbeing of the people.

Adopting the motion after securing support of



•Scene of multiple vehicle crash at Ihiala

By Emma Elekwa, Onitsha

the majority of its members, the House mandated its committee on police affairs and legislative compliance to ensure compliance to the resolution.

Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) has called on the Inspector-General of Police, Usman Alkali Baba to eliminate all police roadblocks in the southeast as soon as possible.

The group, in a statement signed by its National Coordinator, Comrade Emmanuel Onwubiko noted that the threat of illegal police checkpoints and their constant extortion of South-Easterners must be addressed.

It complained that the existence of allegedly corrupt police officers on an extortion spree is to be blamed for the extrajudicial murders of drivers in several regions of Nigeria, most of which occur when the drivers refuse to pay a bribe of as little as N100.

The statement reads, "Friday's disaster, according to the human rights advocacy organization, was only one of many, and that the whole southeast is renowned for police checks and extortions."

"Remember that in January 2022, Justice Ike Ogu of the Anambra State High Court ordered the state administration and police to dismantle all roadblocks in Anambra, yet the police continue to operate roadblocks without constraint."

HURIWA urged the IGP to follow the court order forthwith and disband the illegal checkpoints which serve no purpose but to hasten the death of innocent citizens.

"HURIWA lamented that security agents who ought to maintain and enforce the law are flagrantly disobeying the judgement of a law court declaring the illegality of checkpoints and roadblocks in the southeast."

"It is even more lamentable that extortions go on at these roadblocks by police officers and the IGP has turned a blind eye to the menace."

A veteran journalist, Jude Atupulazi opined that the checkpoints were necessary in view of the security challenge in the area.

He however advised that the security agencies manning the checkpoints should not take their advantage to extort and harass motorists.

He said, "I've often read people demanding for removal of road blocks. Yes, those road blocks are impeding movement, especially those inside Awka. But I think our emphasis should be on ways to make the people suffer less."

"We know these road blocks didn't just come up. They came up in response to attacks by hoodlums; known and unknown, on police facilities. Did we expect the police to remain hands akimbo and wait for those people to come kill them or gain access into the city? No!"

"I can assure you that without those road blocks Awka would have been attacked and

activities in other areas would have been worse. Remember Awka was attacked when there were no road blocks. Since then, nothing again."

"Thus, those asking for the dismantling of road blocks don't seem to be factoring in the reason for setting them up. I'd rather wait for some minutes before passing a road block than be shot at in town."

"What we should be saying is for police at those road blocks to operate with decorum and not use them as opportunities to oppress or extort money."

Another resident, Enwere Charles said the debate should never be if the checkpoints should be dismantled, but how to reduce and make them serve the society.

He said, "How can we in our right senses as Nigerians question the rationality of having security presence on our highways? With the current security situation everywhere?"

"How can we also in our right senses deny the shameless extortion and indiscipline displayed by security operatives that man these checkpoints especially in south eastern Nigeria? The one pole one checkpoint phenomenon?"

"This ought to be a partnership. A partnership of stakeholders who first admit that we are not living in heaven and hence are not angels... and thus can do wrong sometimes."

Although Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) had put the casualty figure of last Friday's crash at two persons, but eyewitness account had it that scores of lives were lost in the crash.

According to State Sector Commander, Adeoye Irelewuyi, a male adult and child died, while nine persons, including four women sustained varying degrees of injury in the crash which involved seven vehicles including an articulated truck.

He said the corpses of the deceased were immediately deposited at the hospital morgue, warning motorists to avoid speeding and keep to recommended speed limit.

He said, "Unidentified driver of an orange Mercedes 911 truck UWZ556XA had a fatal road traffic crash with 6 other vehicles at Ken Maduako's oil and gas filling station by Ihiala-Onitsha highway today 18th February, 2022 at about 11:02hrs."

"Details of the other 6 vehicles include: Toyota Hiace with Reg number JTT 07 ZI; Toyota Hiace Reg No: ENU 589 XB; Nissan Caravan with reg no: GOD 21 YM."

"Others are Nissan Mini Truck with Reg No: ATN 787 XB; Suzuki Mini Pick-Up with reg No: AKL169 XE and Toyota Hiace bus."

"63 people comprising 52 male adults, 10 female adults, and 1 male child were involved in the crash."

"1 male adult, and 1 male child were killed, 9 people comprising 5 male adults, and 4 female adults sustained varying degrees of injuries, while 52 people were rescued unhurt."

Meanwhile, Police in the state have absolved themselves from the crash, saying it was wrong

to blame the Police for the unfortunate incident.

Police spokesperson, Ikenga Tochukwu in a statement, maintained that stop and search operations were targeted at protecting not only Police facilities in the area from insurgents' attacks but also the general public, mostly at the receiving end of escapades by criminal elements.

He also condemned the protests by drivers of container bearing trailers who blocked both sides of the ever-busy highway, regretting their adamant dispositions to appeals to consider the plight of the motoring public.

He said, "While the Police indeed have a Stop and Search Point close to the scene of the accident, it is wrong to blame the Police for the unfortunate incident."

"The fact that only six vehicles were on queue on a dual carriage way as busy as that expressway is evidence that the Police has been responsible and sensitive to the plight of the motoring public, ensuring minimal delay as it conduct stop and search operations aimed at protecting not only Police facilities in the area from insurgents' attacks but also the general public who are mostly at the receiving end of escapades by criminal elements."

"It is unfortunate that drivers of container bearing trailers, under the umbrella of their union, who were mis-informed about the cause of the accident mobilised heavy trucks to the scene at about 1630 hours on the day of the accident and blocked the ever busy highway on both sides."

"All entreaties made to them to consider the plight of the motoring public have fell on deaf ears. Innocent motorists are at the receiving end of this ill-advised blockade."

"The Nigeria Police wishes to appeal to the unionists to have a rethink in the interest of their fellow citizens and consider the plight of stranded travellers to remove the blockade from the highway. The Police will continue to explore peaceful means of resolving the imbroglio to prevent further loss of precious human lives."

The Commissioner of Police, Anambra State Command, CP Echeng Echeng wishes to commiserate with families of the two persons who died and nine others who were injured in the fatal accident.

The Federal Road Safety Commission attributed the fatal crash to overspeeding and brake failure by a container-bearing trailer whose driver is one of the two persons that died in the unfortunate accident.

"The Police Command also commend the officers of the Federal Road Safety Commission for promptly rising to the occasion and partnering with the Police in getting the injured to the hospital and clearing the wreckage from the road to allow for free flow of traffic."

"The CP while thanking the good people of Anambra State for the robust support to the Command continue, assures that the Police will continue to raise the bar of service delivery in the interest and safety of the law abiding public."