

# Buhari orders manhunt for sponsors of Imo illegal refinery

• Death toll rises to 130 in Imo explosion

By Chris Njoku On Apr 25, 2022



***By Chris Njoku, Owerri; Bolaji Ogundele and Faith Yahaya, Abuja***

President Muhammadu Buhari yesterday directed security agencies to track down those behind the illegal refinery that exploded in Imo State on Friday.

No fewer than 130 charred bodies have been recovered from the scene – a forest at Abaezi in Ohaji-Egbema Local Government Area.

President Buhari directed security agencies to clamp down on illegal refineries.

According to a statement by his Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Mallam Garba Shehu, the President said responsibility for the loss of lives and property must squarely lie with the sponsors of the illegal refinery, “who must all be caught and made to face justice.”

“President Muhammadu Buhari has directed the nation’s Armed Forces, security and intelligence agencies to intensify the clampdown on illegal refineries following the reported deaths of tens of people Friday night after an illegal refinery exploded at Abaezi forest in the Ohaji-Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State,” the statement read.

The President conveyed “the condolences and the full depth and range of the nation’s shock and trauma” to the families of the victims, the Ohaji Egbema community and the government and people of Imo State.

He urged community leaders, the police and the secret service to never allow the occurrence of the heart-breaking incident in any part of the country again.

The explosion killed over 100 people who came to the site to buy illegally-refined petrol, with many vehicles razed.

At least 30 more charred bodies were recovered from the ashes, debris of burnt buildings and surrounding farmlands yesterday.

Some sympathisers and family members who came to search for their missing relations discovered that new bodies were not among more than 100 bodies counted after the explosion.

“We are here to look for our missing relations,” said a resident Chief Mark Nwalue.

“More bodies were later seen inside the farmland. They were burnt and we could not recognise them.”

A resident, who pleaded not to be named, said security agencies were aware of the existence of the illegal refinery.

“The security operatives are aware that the illegal refinery has been existing for a long time. They look the other way as the business went on.

“They don’t arrest the dealers because they are beneficiaries. All of them are driving big cars from the proceeds of the business,” the resident said.

NSCDC spokesman in Imo, Chimesiri Lowell, did not pick up several calls to him.

Police spokesperson Michael Abattam, a Chief Superintendent of Police, said it was NSCDC’s job to monitor such activities.

Imo State Government warned the youths in the oil-producing communities against engaging in illegal bunkering.

Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Declan Emelumba, noted that the risk of such mishaps was too high a price to pay.

“While we condemn the action of the people engaged in such illegal activities, we condole with the families of those who lost their lives.

“We call on the people to desist from such illegalities as the consequences are what we have just witnessed,” he said.

Former Imo governor and Senator representing Imo West Senatorial District, Rochas Okorocha, regretted the loss of lives, describing the incident as disheartening.

In a statement by his Special Adviser on Media, Sam Onwuemeodo, he urged the Minister of State for Petroleum, Timipre Sylva, to set up a judicial panel of inquiry.

It is, according to him, to unravel the remote and immediate causes of the Abaezi incident, to avert a re-occurrence.

Okorocha prayed that “God would console the families affected by this disaster and give the souls of all those who lost their lives in the bloody incident, eternal rest”.

Also yesterday, Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, Sadiya Farouq, decried the explosions in Lagos, Ogun and Imo states, saying they were avoidable.

Last Thursday, a PMS-laden 45,000-litre tanker crashed and spilt its content along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway.

In a statement by her media aide, Nneka Anibeze, the minister said caution should be applied while plying the roads with inflammable substances.

She also stated that the illegal bunkering of petrol was suicidal.

The statement reads in part: “The occurrence of explosions in Lagos and Imo states is unfortunate but avoidable.

“Illegal bunkering of petroleum products is a punishable offence under the law.

“Therefore, the culprits should be brought to book to face the full wrath of the law.

“I sincerely sympathise with the families of the victims and pray for the repose of the souls of the dead.

“I also appeal to the people especially the youths to desist from illegal bunkering of petroleum products in the area.”