

## Women, children burnt to ashes in Rivers pipeline explosion

•Concern as illegal oil bunkering assumes worrisome dimension in communities •LG boss blames security agencies, alleges complacency

**C**HARRED remains of victims littered the scene. They were burnt beyond recognition. Men, women, young and old experienced the fury of crude oil explosion that occurred at a pipeline right of way in Rumuekpe, Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.

While security agencies said at their arrival they counted about 12 burnt corpses, others said dozens perished. A lawyer from Rumuekpe community, who identified himself as Ikenga, said over 30 people were burnt to ashes.

"It was tragic, like what happened at Ogbaland in Imo State last year. Over 30 persons were reduced to ashes. Seven buses, over 20 tricycles and unknown number of motorcycles were burnt. It is terrible," Ikenga said.

Like flies that follow a corpse to the grave, the victims were involved in the illegitimate business of illegal refining of petroleum products despite warnings against it. When

Mike Odiegwu, Port Harcourt

residents were fast asleep, the vandals went like sneaked into the community to siphon crude oil from the pipeline.

It was about 2am. The scene of the explosion belongs to the Trans-Niger Delta Pipeline (TNP). Illegal oil dealers assembled at the scene under the cover of darkness to load crude oil from a tapping point on the pipeline.

The crude oil was usually loaded at the compromised point and conveyed to the locations of their illegal refineries. Some people tapped the line, then informed illegal refinery owners, who came with vehicles, collected the crude for various fees and took them to their sites for refining. The business had gone on for a while unnoticed.

But on Friday, March 23, they ran out of luck. It was gathered that a driver after loading his bus unknowingly turned on the vehicle's ignition thereby breaching the

safety conduct at such inflammable site. Like a bomb, the deafening explosion occurred and resulted in fire that consumed everybody within the site.

Local Government Chairman of Emohua, Dr. Chidi Lloyd, who led his team to the site, said the council and the state governor, Nyesom Wike, had collaborated and carried out massive sensitisation against illegal bunkering. He said such efforts resulted in cleaner air around the state. He, however, said intelligence revealed that the syndicates were returning to the creeks in full force to start the illegal business afresh.

Lloyd said he got information about the latest incident at about 5:25am adding that women and children were also killed by the explosion. He decried lack of synergy between the state and the Federal Government on issues involving illegal bunkering.

He said: "We have done nearly all the known

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advocacy against this illegal oil bunkering. We have also told our people the hazards that come with it. Apart from the environmental pollution, their safety is at stake. They are dealing with crude oil and they don't know how to manage crude.

"My attention was drawn to this at about 5:25am. Women and children who came here to scoop crude oil were all dead. It is Rumuekpe that people are calling. What of the owner of this facility? How are they manning this facility? I feel very sad. The state governor took on this matter for more than one year. This is why we can even breathe fresh air in Rivers.

"I accuse security agencies of complacency. How many roadblocks did you see before you got here? It is a cabal. If the boys scoop and they can't get out they will stop. I got intelligence that the boys have returned in full force into this illegal business. What just happened here may still happen at Ndele.

"From neighbouring states like Bayelsa and Delta, they are lodging in small hotels. I have called on my people to be vigilant and stop allowing strangers come and mess up our place. Those who died there are not only from Rumuekpe. We have been on this fight. We fought it vigorously.

"There is no synergy between us and the Federal Government. The Chief of Army Staff and Minister of Petroleum were here once. They just came, went to Ibaa, clamped down on some places and boarded their flight and left. But the boys are back energised.

"We are calling on Timipre Sylva to come back the way he came the last time because another one has started again in a more mechanised form. The government must do something decisive about this."

The Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre (YEAC-Nigeria) first alerted authorities about the Rumuekpe incident through its Crude Oil Spill Alert System (COSAS). The Executive Director, YEAC, Fyneface Fyneface, confirmed that many people were dead.

He said: "The explosion happened at about

2am today, Friday, March 3, 2023 when one of the buses that were loaded with crude oil to drive to another area where the refining will take place in an artisanal refineries kick started his vehicle. It resulted in the explosion.

"The explosion and fire left dozens including women dead and burnt beyond recognition with many other vehicles and tricycles burnt to ashes."

YEAC-Nigeria has been campaigning against crude oil theft, environmental pollution and leading the advocacy for the provision of alternative livelihood opportunities for artisanal refiners in the Niger Delta for the past 12 years through the promotion of modular refineries promised by the Federal Government.

The NGO has also proposed the establishment of Presidential Artisanal Crude Oil Refining Development Initiative (PACORDI) and Network Against Organized Crime in Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea (NAOCINAG).

The Community Development Committee (CDC) Chairman of Rumuekpe, Sheriff Chnatu, blamed the development on fresh rise in illegal bunkering in the area.

He said: "It is caused by illegal bunkering. Sometimes the boys sneak in during odd hours and dig the pipe. They attach their valves. At midnight they come with cellophane and plastic buckets. While they were fetching it, gas saturates the environment.

"We gathered that somebody was on call in one of the vehicle's as they were operating. It resulted in fire that spread. They opened one pipe before but we closed it. I am

going to assist the government to reduce the rate of illegal bunkering within my community."

The community's Vice-Chairman, Ekechukwu Emeka, lamented that the government had abandoned the community saying that the neglect had forced many people to engage in illegal bunkering for survival.

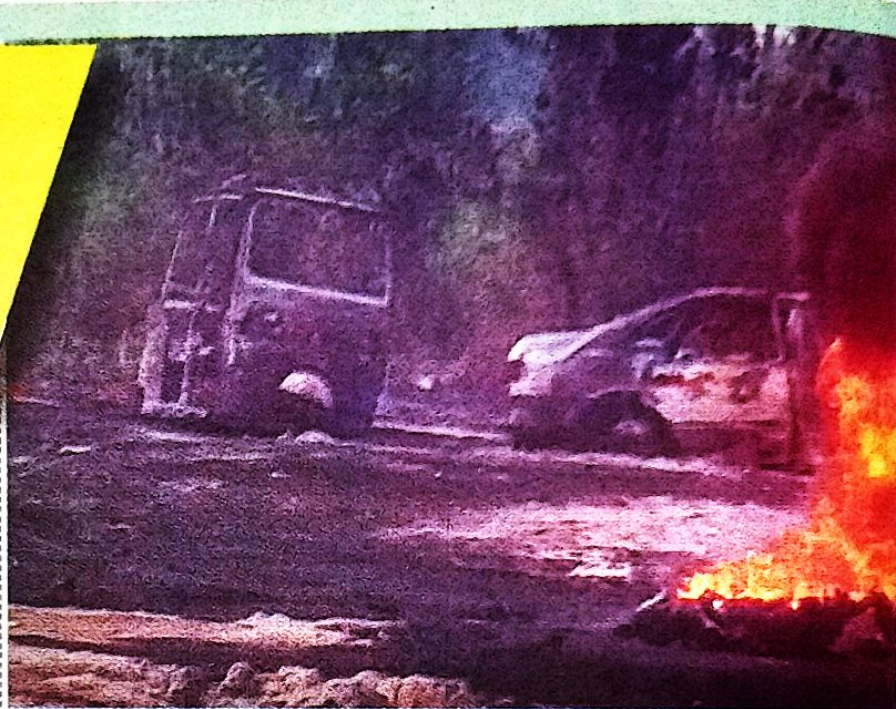
He said: "Some were wounded and were taken to the hospital. It is rampant here because of the failure of the government to recognise this community. No employment for over 50 years.

"Many people were dead. I came here at about 4.45am when I heard the explosion. Many vehicles were destroyed and many died. We can't confirm the number because the fire is still raging. Let the government help this community."

A Niger Delta youth leader and businessman, Richard Akinika, described as painful the reckless loss of human lives insisting that no illegal activity was worth the life of anybody.

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Akinika said: "This is not right. It is painful human lives are gone. This does not worth the life of anybody. How much are you going to make from it? Imagine the number of lives that had been lost - people's parents, brothers and sisters - just because you want to do something illegal to survive. You are gone and you are gone.

"We try to discourage people from this. We are crying out to people in Ahoada too. If you go there you will see them pack these things into their homes. There is a community called Oporowo.

"When fire bursts they will blame the government and the company. Young people should desist from this act of sabotage because your lives are at stake. Who will bring them back? It is very painful."

The Rivers State Police Command confirmed the explosion. The Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), So. Grace Iringe-Koko, said investigations indicated that victims were scooping crude oil when the site caught fire.

She said: "So far, about 12 persons are believed to have been burnt to death. The identities of the victims are still unknown. Five vehicles, four keke NAPEPs, and one motorcycle were all burned to ashes.

"Meanwhile, the Rivers State Commissioner of Police has again admonished members of the public to stay away from illegal oil bunkering and avail themselves of hotlines to report any incident or development they believe has the potential to lead to crime or break down of law and order."