

Billions lost as Rivers tanker inferno consumes pregnant woman, three others, 100 vehicles



Mike Odiegwu, Port Harcourt April 28, 2024



- *Fubara promises compensation*
- *FRSC keeps mum*

Tragedy struck in Rivers State late night Friday as fire from a fuel-laden tanker consumed four persons and about 100 vehicles at the Eleme section of the East-West Road in Rivers State.

It was learnt that the tanker collided with another vehicle, exploded and burst into flames that spread to other tankers and many other vehicles trapped in the gridlock.

The state Police command confirmed that a pregnant woman and three others trapped in the gridlock were burnt to death.

The Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), SP. Grace Iringe-Koko said over 70 vehicles and properties of the travelers were burnt by the inferno.

She said: “At approximately 8:30pm on Friday, April 26, 2024, the Rivers State Police Command received a distress call regarding a fire incident along East-West Road near Indorama Gate, Eleme, caused by a tanker explosion. Immediate action was taken by contacting the fire department and mobilizing operatives to the scene.

“Upon arrival, a joint operation of the Police and Firefighters successfully extinguished the fire by 10:30 p.m. However, over seventy cars were engulfed, and several individuals were trapped.

Read Also; I survived fighting Boko-Haram, Niger Delta militants, IPOB – Anambra CP

“Efforts led to the rescue of many, though the total casualties are yet to be determined. Regrettably, four individuals, including a pregnant woman, have been confirmed dead, and those injured are receiving treatment at nearby hospitals”.

She said the Commissioner of Police, CP. Olatunji R. Disu, and the operations department visited the scene on Saturday to motivate the rescue team and extend condolences to the affected persons.

“Rescue operations are ongoing, with officers deployed to evacuate burnt vehicles and maintain law and order. The Rivers State Police Command remains dedicated to supporting those affected and ensuring public safety”, she said

Most eyewitnesses blamed the disaster on the absence of road safety officials, reckless driving, bad road and negligence of the contractor reconstructing the road.

Giving his account of the incident, one of the drivers, acknowledged the ongoing reconstruction of the road but said the company failed to create an alternative route for road users.

The driver, who identified himself simply as Precious said: “They are working on the road but they should make adequate preparations for vehicles using the road. They should be fast about it. Many people have met their end here. It is bad”.

On how he escaped the incident with passengers on his vehicle, Precious said they arrived at the gridlock late and saw people running backwards and screaming.

He said in the ensuing confusion, he was able to reverse his vehicle and drove to a safe distance.

He said: “I was coming from Eleme heading for Akpajo. Approaching the bridge, I met a hold up. There is always a hold up here so we all decided to follow the line.

“We saw many people running and shouting fire fire. So it was difficult to reverse but we managed to reverse went somewhere and parked. We came back to see that more than 300 vehicles were burnt.

“Many people were trapped in their vehicles and were burnt. Some even ran with the fire and died later. We were a little far that was why we escaped it”.

Another eyewitness, Baridigo, insisted that the construction company failed to create an alternative passage for road users adding that the bad road contributed to it.

“They should have created an alternative routes for vehicles as they work on the road. They should hasten up the job”, he said.

In his account, he said: *We were around this area when we heard explosions. We got to this place and saw the incident. This place was already experiencing a serious gridlock when the tanker exploded.

“There was no way that the vehicles could reverse and leave the scene. This area is sloppy and as fuel spilled down all the vehicles lining up got burnt. People lost their lives. Vehicles and properties worth millions of naira have been damaged.

“The number one cause is this bad road. If the road were in a good shape at least vehicles would have found their ways out of the place. We can’t count the lives lost”.

A company driver, Kingsley Uche, said he was fortunate that his vehicle only got partially burnt in the incident.

He said some Hausa boys helped him to push the vehicle to a safe distance and blamed the incident on recklessness of drivers and contractor’s negligence.

He complained that the FRSC in the state failed to deploy its personnel to maintain safety at the project site.

He said: “I am a regular user of this road. The meridian pavement did not run through. If it had run through, no driver would have been stupid to run into another lane. Our drivers are so stupid and foolish.

“The fault is from the company for not having an alternative route and for not deploying FRSC in the road. There must be road safety here. If not for the grace of God I would have lost this vehicle”.

Also Ossai Samuel Ifeanyi Chukwu begged the contractor to expedite action on the road and to ensure free flow of traffic while working on the road.

He said: “We know that work is ongoing. But we beg the government and the construction company to expedite action and ensure we have free flow of traffic.

“We call on the road safety and people in charge of traffic control to do their jobs. It shouldn’t be all about extorting money from people. Road safety should be after the safety of road users.

“Dangote has solved his problems with his drivers which had led to drastic drop in crashes involving Dangote trucks. Others should call their drivers to order”.

The Rivers State Governor, Sir. Siminalayi Fubara, described the incident as unfortunate expressing his sadness at the gory sights he saw at the scene.

Fubara, who visited the scene in the company of the State Commissioner of Police, Olatunji Disu, and the State Commissioner for Energy and Natural Resources, Mr Uchechukwu Nwafor, on Saturday sympathised with the victims.

The governor explained that he got a call from the Managing Director of Indorama Petrochemical and Fertiliser Company Limited in Eleme Local Government Area, informing him of the incident.

Fubara said that he immediately alerted the security agencies and instructed them to visit the scene of the disaster.

He said: “We are here to see for ourselves and get a first hand information of the incident of what happened yesterday night.

“About 7.30 – 8pm, we got information of the gravity of the incident. I was told that it was caused by a tanker vehicle that was conveying Premium Motor Spirit (PMS).

“In fact, I got the information through the MD of Indorama, and I immediately alerted the security agencies to make sure they take control of the security situation in the area.

“And from what we are seeing this morning, it was not a pleasant case. We recorded a huge number of vehicles being destroyed and lives lost”.

Fubara explained that he had already requested the relevant government agencies to provide him a detailed account of their findings to enable the State Government take appropriate decisions and actions to significantly remedy the situation and reduce the negative impact on the affected people.

He said: “I have already asked the relevant agencies to give us a full brief so that we can come into the situation fully by seeing to how much we can support the families that are bereaved, and also cushion the effect of the losses, which I believe, is no fault of a good number of them.

“We all know the situation of this road. It is really unfortunate. Most of our people, when plying this road, should ply it with caution.

“I believe very strongly that this situation would have been avoidable, if the motorists had behaved properly. But it is late already. The damage has happened. This is the situation we have found ourselves. We will see how we can control the aftermath”.

Despite the magnitude of the accident, the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) failed to provide details of the incident and its cause.

On two occasions when he was reached for his comments, the State Sector Commander, Chris Kuje, said he was busy attending a Navy event.