

# How 22 traders, artisans died in Niger boat disaster



- *Eight rescued in boat carrying over 50 passengers; many still missing*
- *Preliminary reports blame poor visibility, overloading*
- *How boat owner tried to outsmart NIWA officials*
- *Agency sends rescue team; sets up investigation panel*
- *From Justina Asishina, Minna/ Olaide Oyelude, Lokoja*

An alleged move by a merchant boat owner to evade surveillance by the **National Inland Waterways Authority** (NIWA) is believed to be largely responsible for yesterday's accident on the River Niger, leaving at least 22 people dead.

Many are still missing.

The wooden craft reportedly took off from an abandoned jetty at 1am yesterday apparently with "intent to beat NIWA's tight surveillance on the waterways," the agency said last night.

The agency said the boat unexpectedly went under along the Dambo-Ebuchi sections of the river where the waters can be more than 600 metres across.

It cited "poor visibility and overloading" as possible causes of the tragedy.

The Director-General of the Niger State Emergency Management Agency (NSEMA), Abdullahi Baba-Arah, said separately that the accident occurred between Baro and Akwanu communities of Agaie Local Government Area of the state.

Baba-Arah said the boat had about 50 passengers on board.

The victims who were mainly traders and artisans had set off from Ebe community in Kupa South Local Government Area of Kogi State heading to Katcha market in Niger State.

The D-G said that 22 bodies had been recovered, while eight persons had been rescued alive so far.

Bab-Arah added that 18 of the recovered bodies were from Kogi State, while four were inhabitants of Akwanu community in Agaie LGA in Niger

He said that search and rescue operation was still ongoing to locate more survivors, adding that the general public would be provided with further updates.

Sandra Musa of the Kogi State Emergency Management Agency said the tragedy could “be from turbulence or from the boat hitting a snag. Boat operators don’t usually have life jackets, so none of the bodies recovered had life jackets on.

“The age of the boat might have played a role. Usually the lifespan of boat is between five and ten years, but you see boats aged 20 years. We will have a better idea of the situation tomorrow.”

### **NIWA sends rescue team**

The agency confirmed last night that it had dispatched an emergency rescue team to search for missing passengers.

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Its media unit in a statement in Lokoja said: “Preliminary findings by NIWA indicate that the wooden boat was travelling to the Katcha market in Niger State when it suddenly went under due to poor visibility and overloading. There are no details of lives lost so far.

“The wooden craft, operated by an unknown boat operator left with unsubstantiated number of passengers from an abandoned jetty at 1am, Friday morning with intent to beat NIWA’s tight surveillance on the waterways.

“To unravel the cause of the accident, NIWA has set up an investigation panel to ascertain the real cause of the accident, the total number of passengers onboard, and the owner of the craft.

“Meanwhile, the top management team of NIWA is leading and coordinating the rescue operations as well as making sure the survivors of the boat mishap receive urgent medical attention.

“NIWA shall, in due course, release more information after the investigation has been concluded.

“We are shocked by this incident despite all our efforts to sensitise Nigerians about safety measures on waterways.

“Not quite long, we unveiled the National Waterways Transportation Code, visited communities and stakeholders to make them have a buy in to our strategy to curb accidents on water, and also discussed with state governors in Nigeria to partner with us in providing safe water crafts to help move people and goods safely across our waterways, and now, sadly, this happened.

“NIWA will investigate this accident and will prosecute the boat captain and owner for deliberate disobedience to the extant law on waterways.”

Kogi State Governor Ahmed Ododo expressed shock at the tragedy and urged private boat operators and local authorities to ensure safety improvements.

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The governor said he was “particularly concerned that most of the victims were women, petty traders and artisans who are involved in legitimate business activities to earn a living and contribute to the economy of the state.”

A similar boat accident on the Muwo Gbajibo River in Mokwa Local Government Area of Niger State on October 1 claimed many lives.

An overloaded boat also sank on the Gummi River in Zamfara State in September with more than 40 believed to have died.

Only on Wednesday, the Managing Director of NIWA, Mr. Bola Oyeibanji, had identified human errors, drugs and disobedience to the rules and regulations as the major causes of boat mishaps that have occurred in the past three years .

Oyeibanji spoke while fielding questions from the members House Representatives Committee on NIWA who were on oversight function to the Headquarters of the Authority in Lokoja.

He, however, said NIWA is committed to the safety of the Nigerians using water for transportation.