

# Katugal Petrol Tanker Fire:

## ...How 120 people were consumed

## ...villagers count losses

For 24 hours, villagers watch helplessly as fire burnt their sons, friends, husbands and wives at Katugal, a sleepy community in Kaduna State leaving in its trail the charred remains of people. Our reporter **JAMES SANISWAM** writes.

**D**AN ASABE Yaro cast a long, glooming look at the hot afternoon sun as he re-called the sad memory of last week's fire incident in Katugal, a small community in Kagarko local government area of Kaduna State, some 38 kilometres south of Kafanchan.

He had just returned from the weekly Monday market in Kubacha a nearby village and needed to rest but on looking around in the family compound, Yaro noticed the absence of his two little kids. "Where are all the children?" he asked. "They are out there at the foot of the hill where people are scooping fuel from a truck that fell down," he was told.

The information jerked him to his feet and he dashed out. "I sensed danger knowing how dangerous petroleum can be," he told *New Nigerian Weekly*. "I was fortunate to locate them just at twilight and dragged them home."

But for Malam Mailafiya Yari, the *dogari* to District Head of Katugal, he was not so lucky to leave the scene before the raging fang-like explosion seized him. As an elder, he had strolled down to caution people at the scene of the incident some 500 metres away from the palace but people, mostly youths, would not listen to his wise counsel.

The old man stood, insisting that everybody must leave but the more he dared them the greater the number that surged. "You know it's difficult to deal with the crowd in this kind of situation especially when poor villagers think it's a rare opportunity," explained an eye witness.

Baffled by their uncanny disposition the *dogari* became indignant while still undecided on the next line of action. He was in this state when the unexpected happened.

In a split of a second, "fire enveloped every where with a resounding bang that shook the entire community sending a thick billow of smoke heaven-wards that painted a dark shadow over the land," said Yaro.

The total darkness and depression of mind was spontaneous. Everyone was mute, hands strapped to the head and mouths wide opened in awe. Moments later, wailing in cacophony, the villagers rushed towards the scene as the tongue of fire pierced through the subsiding smoke casting an ember-like glow over the land.

"This is a very great tragedy," the District Head of Katugal, Ishaku Barnabas Gado noted in an interview with *New Nigerian Weekly*. He stated with sober reflection that such mishap has never happened in the entire history of the community lamenting that "the whole community is saddened."

He said there are five clans in Katugal and none was unaffected as shown by the vivid display of photographs of the victims in their family compounds, noting that five to six people were lost in some homes, while a minimum of one person per household especially in Sabon-gari Katugal.

He dispelled rumour that all the victims went to scoop fuel, saying as a market day in neighbouring Kubacha, a lot of people stopped by on their way back to see what was happening near the truck and so also students who closed from school in the evening.

As the custodian of the community, the District Head is grieved by the fact that many men died and left young women and children who cannot fend for themselves ad-



Malam Mailafiya Yari was caught in the fire

gers that were passing through on the highway. "It is a small village and we all know ourselves. Every home knows how many of its members are missing and the number, I can tell you, is over 120 people."

The fire burnt from 7pm on Monday till dawn on Tuesday, roasting people to ashes with only few whose skeleton or charred body could be found.

Joseph James whose immediate younger brother who owned two commercial buses died in the incident blamed ignorance on the part of the villagers as the most likely reason such a large number of them scooped from the pool without fear of danger inherent in their activities. Though he agreed that poverty has eaten deep into the fabric of so many communities in Nigeria today to inspire their action, he averred that if villagers are abreast of the consequences of scooping petroleum products they would distant themselves from the scene no matter the gain.

"No matter how poverty has eaten into someone, except for ignorance, he/she will not venture into something that outrightly he/she knows will lead to death," he pointed out.

Joseph believed the villagers "may not be aware of the danger" to that proportion and thus implored government through its various agencies like National Emergency



The heap of burnt bodies

equately in this prevailing harsh economic situation in the country.

"One of my major worry now, in Katugal community, is how to contend with the numerous young women and little children left behind. What will be their fate? Who will shoulder their responsibilities?" he asked rhetorically.

An eyewitness told *New Nigerian Weekly* that though about 90 dead bodies were given mass burial on Tuesday when the deputy governor of Kaduna State Patrick Yakowa visited the community, more dead bodies have been recovered from the bush as the search continued for missing loved ones. He stated that 12 dead bodies were brought from the hospital that Tuesday night and two on Wednesday, all given mass burial.

He said from available records of missing persons in homes, there are about 120 villagers that can be said to have died in the inferno in Katugal alone apart from stran-

Management Agency (NEMA) and National Orientation Agency (NOA) to "step up efforts to create awareness in villages to forestall future occurrence now that it is not only through pipeline vandalization that such mass death could be recorded."

For a long time, the people of Katugal and their neighbours will extremely find it difficult to forget what has happened. Each time they pass by the spot, the remains of the truck by the highway and the heap of mass grave would no doubt bring back the ugly memory to life. "It will remain indelible in our sub-conscious for God knows when moreso when you keep seeing women, children and old people whose breadwinners were victims," mourned Markus Akuso, who like others in the diaspora, thronged home to console their kinsmen.



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## Over 40 students of GSS Katugal were killed in the inferno — *District Head*

**H**ONESTLY, this is a very great tragedy to the Katugal community because this type of unforeseen incident has never happened to us at all. The whole community is so saddened but there is nothing we can do except to leave it to God for it's only Him that can console us.

My *Dogari* Malam Mailafiya Yari was a victim of the incident and coincidentally, he was the only one I had in this palace working since the inception of the chieftdom. He was also the first *Dogari* in the entire chieftdom who has been here right from when the district was under Zaria many years ago. He was loyal, obedient, dedicated and a responsible father to his family.

## 'My brother died and left 3 wives and 8 children'

**JOSEPH JAMES**, Manager, International Livestock Market, Abuja, blamed not only poverty but ignorance for the death of his two brothers and countless others. He told **JAMES SANI SWAM** in Katugal that government through its agencies has failed to educate and enlighten rural dwellers on such risk taking exercise. Excerpts:

**P**ERSONALLY, I see what happened as the will of God Almighty on the people of Katugal; an unforgettable lesson, indeed. I lost two relations namely Luka and Ibrahim who were my younger brother and cousin, respectively.

The genesis of the incident was a long vehicle that was conveying petroleum products. It was alleged to be unable to ascend a hill just by the bend and thus started rolling backwards and fell but the driver and his motor boys came out unhurt.

People were there including my brothers scooping fuel from the truck and after one hour thirty minutes, fire got hold of the place and a lot of people got consumed in the belly of the rampaging inferno. We were able to take my brother (Luka) to the hospital where he later died but my cousin (Ibrahim) was burned beyond recognition, in fact into ashes amongst others. Eye witnesses alleged that the fire did not start from the spot where the tanker fell but from some metres away. So there're agitations that someone may have ignited the fire but we leave everything to God.

The District Head of Katugal, **MR. ISHAKU BARNABAS GADO** said it was a great tragedy to the Koro Community, lamenting that of concern now are the women and children left behind. He spoke to **JAMES SANI SWAM** in his palace. Excerpts:

I shall greatly miss him.

There are five clans in Katugal and each was affected by the fire incident as explained by the record of missing persons in households. Every compound you approach, you are immediately confronted by photographs of the dead displayed on the walls. Pictures of happy looking youngmen and women who

My late brother was a driver who had two buses and in fact one of the buses was parked right there by the road side. They were just about to lift the jerry-cans filled with fuel into the bus when fire struck. He bought the buses through farming of cassava and ginger. He was a hard working, industrious Youngman in his early thirties who left behind three wives and eight children.

I repeat that I accept this as the will of God because everybody is appointed to live and die at a particular time. However, ignorance, poverty and inadequate awareness on such occurrence could be attributed? Some of us are fortunate to be enlightened seeing incidences like this in the media. Many people drove their family members away from the spot because they understood the implication. But I think the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and others involved should disseminate more information down to the grassroots to get them enlightened and informed of the consequences of going near petroleum products. These people may not be aware of the danger so government should step up efforts to create awareness in villages to forestall future occurrence now that it is not only through pipeline vandalism that such mass death could be recorded. So Agencies like NOA and NEMA should avail communities of information as to the risk involved in playing in a pool of petroleum.

Therefore, I challenge the government in this respect because no matter how poverty has eaten into someone, except for ignorance, he/she will not venture into something that outrightly he/she knows will lead to death.

were bubbling with life just yesterday afternoon.

There were also victims from the neighbouring villages and towns who were passing and decided to see what was happening. There were strangers who normally come during the dry season farming period, Hausa/Fulanis and other tribes. Remember that it was Kubacha's market day (Monday) and different people attend the market because it is about the biggest ginger, cassava and honey market in the state, just some few kilometers from Katugal.

As at the last count, the principal of GSS Katugal said about 40 students were killed in the inferno and they were still counting. Most of them just closed from evening classes going to their various homes when this calamity happened.

I want to point out that it was not everybody that died that went there to scoop petroleum. Many went there to caution people of the danger while some stood there discussing irrelevant issues while others were even passing by because it was by the high way.

One of my major worry now in the community is how to contend with the numerous young women and little children left behind. What will be their fate? Who will shoulder their responsibilities? It is indeed pathetic.

We understand from observations that the long vehicle was old and dilapidated. The driver was said to have been managing it from where he started the journey and news got to us that it stopped for repairs at Jere many times before it eventually got here but could not climb the hill. Normally, a vehicle in good condition is supposed to climb this little hill because we see them pass this way severally.

I would advice that government should talk to oil transporters or marketers to see the need to face out old trucks to forestall breakdown on our highways because old trucks are prone to accidents than new ones or better still, they should develop vehicle maintenance culture because most of them don't service their vehicles regularly.