

False alarm caused Anambra church stampede — Archbishop

APC, APGA trade blames

Umeh calls for arrest of Ngige

FROM BOLA BADMUS AND SUZY ORUYA

THE Catholic Archbishop of Onitsha Diocese, Most Reverend Valerian Okeke, has attributed the stampede at Holy Ghost Adoration Centre, Uke, Anambra State, to "false alarm."

Okeke said at a news conference on Sunday that the stampede was not caused by sabotage and that the church was not suspecting any sabotage, saying, "it is an unfortunate incident."

Represented by Reverend Father Uche Ukor, the Director of Social Communications, Okeke also denied reports that the stampede was caused by a snake that purportedly came out from somewhere.

"In the early hours of Saturday, November 2, there was a stampede moments after prayers at Holy Ghost Adoration Centre, Uke, in Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra State."

"The stampede, which occurred while people were going home, resulted in the loss of some lives. Some are still injured and receiving treatments in some hospitals."

"The stampede was reportedly caused by a false alarm raised by somebody in the crowd along one of the narrow roads out of the town."

"The crowd was so much that people wanting to leave all at the same time made it very difficult for people to find enough space to move."

"Vigil was usually held at the centre on every first Friday of the month," he said.

Hold Obi responsible — APC

However, the All Progressives Congress (APC), on Sunday, said the Anambra State governor, Mr Peter Obi, should be held responsible for the stampede at a vigil in Uke that left over 30 people dead.

The party said this in a statement issued in Lagos by its Interim National Publicity Secretary, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, declaring that the governor

should take the blame for turning a house of prayer into a house of politics.

The party argued that the innocent souls who died at the vigil would be alive today had Obi and the unpopular candidate he was seeking to impose on the people of the state, Willie Obiano, not gone to the praying ground to engage in wrongful politicking.

The APC, while saying that there was nothing wrong in a state governor going to a vigil, explained that such visit should not be impromptu in order for the organisers to make the necessary security arrangements.

It also said such a visit should also not be a licence to engage in political campaign.

The party condemned the plan by the governor to set up a panel to investigate the stampede, saying its position was based on the fact that Obi himself was at the centre of the whole tragedy.

"Setting up a panel to investigate the cause of the stampede will amount to seeking to be a judge in your own case. The only cause of the stampede is the governor's ill-advised visit to the vigil. Information at our disposal has it that the stampede was triggered by the governor's overzealous security details who manhandled congregants as their principal was exiting the venue of the vigil. The security details were said to have been irked by the murmurs of disapproval that greeted the governor's attempt to campaign for his candidature, Mr Obiano."

"It is, therefore, disingenuous for the governor's spin doctors to be shifting the blame on the supporters of our candidate, Senator Chris Ngige. The simple truth is that there would have been no stampede if Governor Obi had not come to the vigil or, even if he had come, had not attempted to politicise the gathering that was meant strictly for prayers," APC said.

Obi accuses Ngige, APC

However, Governor Obi has accused a former governor of the state and governorship candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC) in the November 16, 2013 election, Dr Chris Ngige, of instigating the tragedy in Uke, Idemili North Local Government Area of the state, which claimed about 30 lives.

Governor Obi, in a broadcast to the people of the state on Sunday, alleged that while he was speaking on the occasion of the Christian programme where the stampede occurred, some people were shouting "Ngige slogan and waved brooms."

Obi said: "When I was called upon by the priest to speak as the governor of the state at about 12 midnight when the mass ended, a group of people located in three different spots started chanting Ngige slogans and waving the brooms of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the pictures of Dr Chris Ngige, the APC's standard-bearer in the November 16 governorship election."

"It took up to 20 minutes for the priest to calm them down. I was surprised that some people would turn a prayer ground into a campaign venue."

"I have directed all security agencies to do everything possible to unearth the cause of this mayhem. A panel of inquiry will soon be constituted to investigate what happened," adding that "I have declared three days of mourning starting from yesterday (Saturday) in honour of our departed ones."

The governor said he was invited to the programme by the priest in charge, Reverend Father Emmanuel Obinma, saying he went to the programme with his elder sister, Reverend Sister Martina Obi, the National Chairman of APGA, Chief Victor Umeh, among others.

He said: "I have directed all security agencies to do everything possible to unearth the cause of this mayhem."

Orji, Atiku commiserate with Obi

Similarly, Abia State governor, Chief Theodore Orji, has condoled the government and people of Anambra State over the unfortunate deaths of 27 worshippers that occurred last Saturday.

Meanwhile, former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar has also extended his condolence to the families of those killed in Anambra State during a church vigil at Uke.

The former vice-president regretted that such a tragedy would befall persons who had taken out time to commune with their God, and called for a probe into the incident to avoid acrimony in the state.

Atiku expressed his condolences to families of the victims, the people and government of Anambra State and the Catholic Church over the tragedy.

He prayed for the repose of the souls of the dead and comfort to their families to bear the loss.

Umeh calls for arrest of Ngige

THE National Chairman, All Progressives Grand Alliance, (APGA), Chief Victor Umeh, on Sunday, called on the Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Abubakar, to arrest all those involved in the stampede at Adoration Ground at Uke, Idemili North Local Government Area, Anambra State, leading to the death of 28 worshippers.

Umeh also called on Inspector General of Police to effect the immediate arrest of Senator Chris Ngige for his role in the death of 28 worshippers at Holy Ghost Adoration Arena at Uke.

Umeh, in a chat with newsmen in Awka, urged the police to move for Ngige's arrest for instigating the pandemonium that ensued at the end of the crusade which left scores of people dead and injured.

Umeh, who hinged his call on the actions of Ngige and his supporters, wondered what his supporters were doing at the crusade ground with their

party symbols consisting of brooms and posters of Ngige if it was not part of an orchestrated plot to cause confusion at the prayer ground in search of cheap propaganda.

Umeh said: "From what happened at the Holy Ghost Adoration ground, it was obvious that the mayhem and pandemonium were carefully planned and executed by Dr Chris Ngige's team."

"He has been very notorious for this type of antics. Having wasted about 25 human lives, it will be so little to say that the police should (only) come here and ask people questions."

"Ngige should be immediately arrested because the signs were there that he planned and executed this unfortunate tragedy for the fact that people who infiltrated the arena carried his brooms and campaign posters and chanted solidarity songs without any justification."

Umeh recalled that Ngige was earlier at the venue the previous day to participate at the mass without being molested by anybody, but that knowing that Obi would come the next day, he wanted to come but was prevented by the organizers in order to avert a clash of interest.

He regretted, however, that despite being stopped from coming, Ngige had gone ahead to instigate his people to disrupt the Friday vigil to score cheap political points, noting that he had always displayed such destructive tendencies in churches by coming in the middle of service where those he planted would hail him.

In a related development, the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha, Most Reverend Okeke led the mourning mood with thousands of Anambra people, especially Catholics, praying for the repose of the souls of the deceased.

In a press briefing yesterday at Onitsha, Rev Okeke said that the incident happened at the end of the programme at the Adoration Centre on one of the roads leading out of the camp.

Ministerial slots: Group cautions Jonathan over 'Abuja politicians'

OLUWOLE IGE - OSOGBO

A group within Osun State chapter of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), identified as PDP Young Elites, cautioned President Goodluck Jonathan to be cautious of some "Abuja-based politicians", who are out with a deceit that they will deliver the state for him in 2015 if appointed minister.

The warning came, in Osogbo at the weekend, against the backdrop that a particular politician based in Abuja was being favoured for a ministerial slot given to the state, the development which the group feared might thwart the electoral chances of the party in future elections.

In a statement signed by the group's chairman and secretary, Comrade Funso Babarinde and Yemisi Adebisi, respectively, they submitted that "removing a minister from Osun East senatorial district which has the highest number of votes and giving that to another district will definitely create rancour."

COEASU decries massive brain drain, exodus of students from Anambra

SUZY ORUYA - ONITSHA

THE Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU) has lamented the massive brain drain and exodus of students from Anambra State government-owned Nwafor Orizu College of Education in Nsugbe (NOCEN), near Onitsha.

Comrade Emmanuel Asagha, National President of COEASU, disclosed this on Sunday after an extensive meeting with lecturers of NOCEN on improvement of salary and conditions of service.

Asagha noted that the college lecturers were the least paid among the 62 colleges of education in the country, while the students pay exorbitant tuition.

He said the national body of the union would fight to ensure that lecturers in the institution were no longer treated as under-dogs; which undermines the hard work they are putting to make learning better at the college.