

INSIDE LAGOS

Fire outbreaks: Residents blame men-in-red

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Inside Lagos anchor Ayomide Owonibi-Odekanyin takes a chronicle of fire incidents in the state and seeks the opinions of stakeholders.

It has been a fiery start this year across the country and like most events taking the lead in Lagos State, the fury of fire, which rocked the Centre of Excellence in the last few days of last year, is spreading rapidly nation wide.

From the incidents at the popular Balogun market to the oko Baba Sawmill

in Ebute Metta and four houses at the Igando area of the State, it is becoming one too many, leaving in its wake, death and destruction. Almost on daily basis, Lagosians are being greeted with images of heavy dark smoke and fiery balls.

While dry weather has been identified as the major cause of the recent spate of incidents, storing of petrol in the home and markets, careless disposal of cigarette stubs, adulterated fuel, power surge, electric sparks and illegal connection of electricity have also been pointed out as sources of fire outbreaks.

Many people have faulted the response of the fire services and emergency first responders in the state, who have been reputed to always arrive late and without sufficient equipment to the scene of fire incidents.

Although some of the fire incidents were purportedly caused by carelessness, each of them certainly threatened life, health, properties and the environment. Consequently, prompt intervention is required to curtail the these devastating effects.

In just five days into the new year, the Lagos State Emergency Management Authority recorded over 48 emergency calls. According to a statement by the agency's public relations officer, Amodu Shakiru, while 44 of the calls were about actual fire outbreaks, the remaining four were false alerts.

The South-west zonal spokesperson for NEMA, Ibrahim Farinloye also said that in just seven days, a total of 18 fire incidents were recorded.

According to him: "In less than two days, multiple fire incidents have rocked different areas of Lagos. Late Sunday night, the settlement beside the popular Third Mainland Bridge was gutted by fire.

"On Sunday, the state fire service again responded to fire outbreaks at Lorenzo clubhouse, Ado road at Ajah and number 8 Ibi Street, plywood junction, Epe involving two flats. Also, one Williams was on Saturday burnt to death at number 15 Alabi Crescent, Ojokoro area of Ijaiye."

The Director of the Lagos State Fire Service, Rasak Fadipe, who confirmed the incident, said when they received the alert, the Agege Fire Station responded with 10,000 litres of water but the deceased was already burnt.

He said the fire might have been caused by the mosquito coil he lighted before going to sleep, seeing that they did not find a generator or candle.

The Ado road fire incident, which consumed a clubhouse and five other shops in the area reportedly started from the kitchen of the clubhouse and then spread to the bar before it expanding to surrounding buildings. Fadipe, said the quick response of the Onikan Fire Station prevented the fire from escalating. Also, the Epe fire still on the same day gutted two flats in a storey building.

On January 1, a seven months baby Raphael Olawola died in an inferno that consumed a bungalow at number 2, Morountola Street, Ijanikin area of Lagos.

The fire started in one of the rooms in the bungalow where the baby was sleeping, while the mother was cooking in the apartment. Although a tenant noticed the fire, the room was consumed before help could come.

The fire service succeeded in containing the fire from spreading to six other rooms and a shop in the building but the charred remains of the baby was handed over to the police.

Again, a candlelight fire burnt two children to death at Anulowapo Street, Orlowo Bus Stop, Ejigbo area of the state. The kids were burnt to death after a burning candle fell and ignited the mattress they were sleeping on.

Aside the loss of life, other valuables were gutted by fire before the inferno was finally contained.

No less than 45 vehicles were razed by fire at the popular mechanic village at the Ebute-Meta area of the state. It took concerted efforts from the Sari Iganmu and Ilupeju Fire Service to contain the outbreak.

On the same day, fire outbreaks were recorded in eight other locations around the state including at Alaba where 16 rooms were destroyed and on Bourdillion Road, Ikoyi which affected a four-storey building.

Also another outbreak was recorded in Badagry, Sari Iganmu, Akerele, Orile and Okobaba where fire razed 18 rooms in a building.

Again, tragedy occurred along the Lagos/Ibadan Expressway after a tanker fire burnt 24 vehicles and this was just after another tanker lost control along the Ibafo axis of the Lagos-Ibadan expressway, setting several vehicles ablaze and killing about five persons.

On January 7, another fire destroyed the plank market located at Iyana Ishashi, along the Badagry Expressway, destroying goods worth over N5million.

Though the cause of the fire was yet unknown, Farinloye, said the fire was successfully put out after the sawdust was dampened with water, adding that no life was lost.

As if that was not enough, another fire gutted 50 lockup shops and five buildings at the extension of the popular Balogun Market in Lagos.

With this catalogue of fire incidents, concerned Lagosians have raised concerns over the perceived slow response to fire outbreaks by the Lagos Fire Service.

However, many residents complained that there have been too many occurrences and little or no response from the state fire service.

Investigations by Inside Lagos revealed that oftentimes, residents are not aware what steps could be taken to reach the service in the event of an emergency.

"I do not even know if there is a number to call. Is it 911 or what?" A resident told Inside Lagos.

Whatever the case, the Lagos Fire Service has often maintained that it is low awareness on the part of residents rather than poor performance on the part of the service that is responsible for much of the damage attributed to fire in the state.

"The roads are not good enough. If you live in some of those interior areas, you won't bother to call them first. You will think of how to use what you have around you to stop the fire," said Kunle Adejare who lives in Ikotun.

But in a city of about 21 million people, can the fire service be said to be performing optimally?

Omolade Olatunde, a resident of Ikorodu, recounted how he and his neighbours stopped a fire in their compound in the middle of the night.

"I was the first person to notice it," he said. "I shouted and called everybody's attention, so our neighbours woke up. It was the generator that started the fire. It was on the corridor, but it was close to the door to a room that had about five people in. By the time we got out, there was fire in the roof. The generator was burning though it was still on."

Asked if they called the state fire service, Omolade said: "Nobody thought about it, maybe because it was already late, or because we felt we could handle it ourselves, and luckily we were able to stop the fire."

At Owoade Street, Alapere, recently, two buildings were partially destroyed by fire in the middle of the night. Attempts made by some residents to reach the fire service were unsuccessful, a resident informed Inside Lagos.

"Nobody had any number to call. We were more interested in securing our property. But thankfully, no life was lost. Life is the most important thing," said the woman whose flat was most affected.

According to Seun Adeosun who lives in Iyana-Ipaja, and has witnessed a fire incident there, thinking of how to stop a fire outbreak is the foremost thought before calling the fire service.

"It was a shop besides a two-storey building. I saw smoke coming out of the roof. It was very thick. I got closer and realised it was burning. I raised an alarm and so neighbours assembled. It was in the afternoon. We stood watching it for some time. Very many things were suggested – like dry sand, wet sand, water mixed with detergent, and other things like that. At a point we were able to quench it. But it was after everything that I realised I had sustained some injuries. The thick smoke also affected me for a long time after that."

Also lamenting about the slow response of the State Fire Service, a trader in the Balogun Market who lost millions of Naira worth of goods said he watched helplessly as his goods were consumed by fire.

"It was this incident that made me know that we don't have a government. We waited till 4.am before the fire service arrived and by that time the fire had spread to the whole complex.

"I personally begged them to focus on some areas but they simply said there was nothing they could do," he lamented.

Evidently, a lot of work still needs to be done by the government. It has been suggested that fire service vehicles should be positioned at strategic points to make access to affected areas swifter and more realistic. Since most residents are unaware that there is a toll-free emergency line, the Lagos State Fire Service could start its confidence-building re-engagement with the residents by giving tips on what could be considered "first aid" the next time fire decides to rage again in the state.

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