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One-way to early grave: The menace of wrong-way driving in Lagos

October 13, 2018

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And she died, and he was crippled; and he was hurt. The scary list of victims of one-way driving is soaring. TUNBOSUN OGUNDARE's findings offered no hope of redemption anytime soon.

No one will hear the tragedy that befell Madam Christiana (other name withheld) and not wail. Ten days to her 60th birthday, and in the thick of preparation for a grand celebration, she was killed by a reckless driver driving against traffic.

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She was a not-too-lucky victim of one-way driving, who did not live to share her story. She was reportedly knocked down by a commercial bus driver, plying one-way at Bariga area of Lagos and died on the spot.

When her story was mentioned to Saturday Tribune alongside the poster announcing her burial arrangement, our correspondent sought out a fuller version of the unfortunate fate that befell her.



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It was learnt that the woman, who used to live at Toll Gate area of Sango, Ogun State, had gone to see a relation in Bariga in connection with her diamond jubilee when she was hit and killed while crossing the road on her lane, on her way back home. That was on Thursday, 19, July, 2018. She was buried the following day.

"The news of her death was shocking and painful to all of us her neighbours because the woman was an easy-going and peace-loving person," Mr Kayode Ajide told Saturday Tribune in a conversation.



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Ajide, a father of four, explained further that "the deceased was loved by all of us her neighbours. Only when she didn't see you would she not exchange greetings. That is why we were all looking forward to attending her birthday party. There was even aso ebi (uniform) for interested persons and many of us in the neighbourhood actually bought



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the cloth as a mark of honour. The birthday would have been the major event ever put together by her children to celebrate her while alive. But sadly, she didn't make the day. Her death was painful to not only to her family but also to all of us around her."

An acceptable evil?

One-way driving, as dangerous, illegal, unlawful and lawless as it is, has almost become the norm. It is a daily occurrence, especially on routes prone to heavy human and vehicular movements, across the cosmopolitan city and commercial nerve centre of the country. Car owners and commercial drivers, as well as motorcyclists, popularly known as okada riders, indulge in the act, according to findings by Saturday Tribune. Security agents, including soldiers and policemen, educated and uneducated persons, are no exemption. They all drive or ride as applicable, against the traffic, with their action wreaking great havoc on people and property.

By available statistics, many people, old and young, male and female, have fallen victim to the menace. They were either hit or knocked down in the process of crossing the road or using the walkways. Even some are on their legitimate routes when vehicles on one-way run into them. And in the process, many have been sent to early graves while those who are fortunate to survive are left with physical and psychological scars and their different tales of woe.

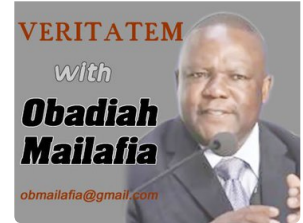
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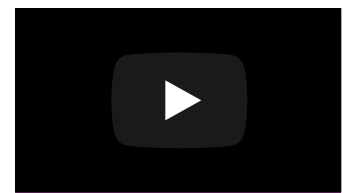
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On Sunday March 11, 2018, four young adults – three male and one female – were in the early hours of the day sent to their early graves. They were passengers of a commercial bus and on their normal lane when a Lexus jeep plying one-way rammed into their vehicle killing the quartet and leaving more people seriously injured.

The accident, which happened at the First Gate inward Oriental Hotel, along Lekki/Epe Expressway, was confirmed by the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency (LASEMA).

The agency, in a statement, disclosed that the jeep GX470 with registration number KJA-615DF ran into the bus marked KRE-302XA, which was just cleared by the ticketing officers at the tollgate. The agency further noted that 16 others, including the driver of the jeep, were injured in the preventable accident.

Lucky survivors

A septuagenarian former top civil servant was lucky unlike Madam Christianah and the four young victims. The retiree was knocked down by an okada rider plying one-way at the NNPC Junction around Oke-Alfa, Ikotun-Egbe Road in Alimosho Local Government Area of the state. Although he survived, his life was said to still be hanging in the

balance because of the severe fracture he sustained from the accident.

His first son who preferred not to have his name and that of his father in print told Saturday Tribune that his aged father, who was headed for his house on a visit to see his grandchildren, got to the said junction on that fateful afternoon and looked left and right to be convinced there was no oncoming vehicle or okada.

But he miscalculated. A desperate motorcyclist, in a bid to avoid slow-moving traffic on his normal route, had taken the alternate side of the road and in the process, knocked him down in the middle of the road.

It was when passersby helped the septuagenarian to the side of the road that he realised something strange had happened to him. His legs could not carry him again let alone use them to walk even till now, according to his son. He had a fracture that reportedly gave him internal injury in the waist region.

Aftermath the accident, the victim, a member of Deeper Life Ministry, was reportedly taken to a native bonesetter around Iyana Ejigbo, but for the past one and a half years, the man has been bedridden. The incident, according to the son, has deprived the family of joy and resources.

He is the only child of the man who lives in Lagos. His siblings, according to him, are living outside Lagos. "So, there is no one to attend to baba (my father) fully where he is. I have to go to work, so does my wife. We only design a method to manage the situation and that is, we alternate our visits to him. When I go to work and the children leave for school, my wife will go there to serve him food before going to her shop.

"When I am back from work, I end up at the place to attend to his needs. Our church members have been helpful too in their own little way.

"But the okada man who caused the problem has no money to assist. It is obvious that he doesn't have saving. He cannot even choose not to go to work a day else his family will go hungry. But he comes at times to sympathise with the family. Now, we have resigned to fate, praying for baba's recovery," he lamented.

Mr Sadrack Dare, 47, is also a victim. But his experience is not as critical as those earlier narrated. He should be considered as one of the lucky few. Even though he was hit like the 70-year-old retiree by an okada rider, he only sustained minor injury on his right leg and toe.

According to him, he was leaving Oshodi for Ajegunle when he got knocked down by a motorcyclist riding on one-way on the popular Oshodi-Apapa Expressway.

"I alighted from a commercial bus on top of Mile 2 Bridge in order to cross to Orile Iganmu side of the expressway and continue my journey. The motorcyclist hit me in the process of crossing the other half of the expressway. I didn't know how this happened. All I knew was that people gathered around me where I was seated by the side of the road. They were good Samaritans and sympathisers who helped me to the place to attend to me. I asked them what happened and they told me not to bother at that moment. They said they would tell me when they saw that I had stabilised, which they did. They said the okada rider maneuvered himself through a small opening on the road median to take one-way and that he ran away after hitting me possibly to escape arrest and taking the responsibility for my treatment.

"I was at the place for about 20 minutes before I continued my journey. Apart from my toe, I also had bruises on my right knee with my trousers also torn at the knee part of my body. It took me up to two months before I could wear shoes again because of the wound on my toe," he explained.

"Even the person I was going to meet and I had told I was already at Mile 2 called me on phones more than 10 times with no response. He was confused with that development as to what could have happened to me within two to three minutes we both spoke last on phone. I thank God it wasn't more than that," Sadrack said in obvious thanksgiving.



WWD dark spots

The victims of unlawful route driving, globally categorised as WWD [Wrong-Way Driving], are too many to be listed and recent observations showed that the sanctions for the traffic offence do not seem to deter violators. WWD is defined by Wikipedia as the act of driving a motor vehicle against the direction of traffic. The Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) calls it route violation. And it can occur on either one or dual carriage ways.

Interestingly, every route in Lagos is known for the practice. However, its frequency, according to Saturday Tribune's investigations, is higher on certain routes such as the Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway from Abule-Egba-Iyana-Ipaja axis down to Ikeja along, Ogba-Ojora Berger Road, Oshodi-Apapa Expressway, especially from Mile 2 up to Apapa axis, Olosa-Mushin road, Agege-Abule-Egba

route, Lekki-Epe Highway, among others. This seeming breakdown of law and order is said to be primarily responsible for the decision by commercial motorcyclists to keep plying their trade on the routes despite the ban placed on their business by the state government.

The adverse effects of the practice are not only about death and physical injury; it sometimes leads to loss of property, including vehicles and huge man-hour, going by the huge traffic that comes with the disorderly behaviour. It also often results in stress, fatigue, and low productivity both at work and home.

Ineffective penalties?

As expected, one-way driving is illegal and sanctionable not only in Lagos but across the country with sanctions provided for those indulging in it, irrespective of status, if caught.

For example, the Federal Government, using the National Road Traffic Regulations, stipulates a penalty of N5,000 fine for the offence and stiffer one when it involves death and the manner of its occurrence.

For instance, Section 20 of the Federal Road Safety Establishment Act 2007, stipulates an imprisonment of not more than seven years upon conviction in a court of competent jurisdiction for any driver who causes the death of another person while driving recklessly, including plying one-way.

Section 21(1) of the same Act explains further that such liable driver could also be fined up to N50,000 or jailed for two years or less or awarded both punishments.

But the Lagos State government, possibly because of the notoriety of drivers and huge consequences of the act on humans and material resources, has

stepped up the sanctions as contained in 'Schedule (1) item 27' of the state Road Traffic Laws 2012 to include fine of N100,000 and the conduct of psychiatric test, compulsory two weeks driving course and showing of tax clearance certificate.

Elite, law enforcers most guilty –Task Force boss

Interestingly, the state has a special agency known as State Environmental Sanitation and Special Offences Unit to enforce the laws guarding against the practice. Saturday Tribune spoke with the chairman of the task force, Mr Saheed Egbeyemi, a Superintendent of Police. His words are quite revealing. He noted that despite government's sustained campaign against the practice, many residents still drive against traffic.

The most confusing thing about the practice, according to him, is that the educated and law enforcement agents, including soldiers, who should ordinarily obey the law without any strict enforcement, also drive on one-way.

At times, Egbeyemi says, he goes out with others on routine patrol and in the process, apprehends so many people indulging in the act.

For example, he disclosed, recently, in just a day, on the Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway, 19 motorists were caught driving on one-way. Twelve of them, according to Egbeyemi, are educated car owners, while the rest are illiterate bus drivers. The task force boss personally led the operation.

"Imagine what would have happened should the whole of Lagos be covered if such huge number could be caught during one operation that didn't last up to three hours," he said.

Also narrating the story of a bullion van driver who was arrested for driving against traffic on Ogunusi Road, Omole-Ojodu area of the city, Mr Egbeyemi

disclosed that on both occasions, his agency dragged the offenders to the Lagos State Mobile Court, Oshodi, established to try traffic offenders.

It was gathered that one of the 19 accused, Mr Felix John, forfeited his Honda Car with registration number BDG 465 XL to the state government after pleading guilty to the offence at the court.

The police officer emphasised that no excuse would be tenable for any motorist to drive on one-way or flout other traffic rules except for proven emergency cases, adding that the state's zero tolerance for wrong-way driving remained in force.

Causes

What then could be responsible for the wrong attitude which experts believed to be uncivilised? Many factors – direct and indirect – are said to be responsible, chief of them, according to Saturday Tribune investigation, is the combination of daily traffic congestion due to bad roads, poor network of roads and impatience of motorists.

This is also the position of a professor of Sociology at Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Patrick Edewor. He said as far as he knows, driving against traffic is a deviant behaviour that has no relevance to the state of mental health of motorists as the Lagos State government wants to make people believe.

Other factors that could equally trigger the behaviour, according to experts, are frustration, time pressure and compromised traffic officers on the road.

For example, Mr Oke Onyeche, 48, who drove the bullion van earlier mentioned, told the court that he drove against the traffic out of desperation to get to his destination in time and that he never knew he would be caught.

Similarly, Mr Kazeem Ademola, a medical doctor, told Saturday Tribune that even though he did not like flouting traffic rules, including driving on one-way, he had done so on about three occasions and it was not because he was insane.

“The first time I drove on one-way was because there was a total standstill on my route at Agege and I was in a hurry to get to work. The second time, I was going to keep a very important appointment and there was a long stretch of traffic and I was almost late. If I didn’t take one-way that day, I would have got to my destinations late and that would have cost me so much,” he said.

Ademola, a father of two, said he was aware that the action was illegal and risky for himself and other road users but was always very careful not to cause accident.

“I don’t want anything that will make me fall prey to the officials of the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA) or the regular police officers or the task force on patrol. Once you are caught, you have to ‘settle’ them with some cash which may not be that much, else, you will be taken to their stations where your vehicle will be impounded and you will have to bail yourself with more money before being allowed to go,” he said.

Corruption in enforcement

Ademola made reference of a female colleague who was unlucky the day she drove on one-way recently. According to him, the lady who lives in Egbeda was on her way to work, and in a bid to avoid traffic on her route, drove on one-way but fell into the hands of police men on patrol. “She suddenly ran into them and there was no escape for her. They blocked her car and asked her to give them N10,000, else she would be taken to the station. But after much plea, she coughed up N1,500,” he claimed.

Saturday Tribune sought the reaction of the task force boss to allegations that policemen and LASTMA officers have been extorting money from violators of traffic codes caught in the act.

While Egbeyemi said he could not categorically say whether police officers were extorting money or not from motorists flouting traffic rules, he maintained that all he knew was that any officer reported or caught doing so with a proof would be sanctioned by the police authorities according to the law.

"Extortion of any type is illegal and not condoned in either the police force or any other security agencies," he emphasised.

According to him, the enforcement unit isn't oblivious of motorists' plights on the road as a result of gridlock but law and order must be respected.

"We are not in a state of anarchy and therefore we must conduct ourselves in an orderly manner and whoever does not comply with the laid down rules should be ready to face the full wrath of the law," he stressed.

Way Out?

How then could the practice be put under control so that unnecessary deaths and loss of property, man-hour and other implications could be prevented on Lagos roads?

Saturday Tribune observed that the laws forcing the offenders to undergo psychiatric test and two-week driving course, among others punishment, for example, have little or no effect in curbing the menace. Interactions with motorists revealed that those laws are seen more as empty threats that cannot be enforced, considering that there is no

record of defaulters on one-way driving ever being subjected to the mental and driving test.

Experts gave their opinions on this, with all, pointing in one direction.

They believe that what is needed is for both the federal and the state governments to rise up to their responsibility and make the highways and major roads plus inner roads smoother and pothole-free in the metropolis.

- **Fayose begins end of tenure activities, says workers should ask Fayemi for their salary**

They believe that most of the vehicular gridlocks which many blame for taking one-way are due to bad roads and poor network of roads and not necessarily because of large volume of vehicles on the road at a given time.

This is also one strong reason the state governor, Mr Akinwunmi Ambode, recently gave in, promising to fix the potholes across the state. Both Professor Edewor and Dr Ademola agree with this position, saying, should all the potholes on Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway, for example, be filled up (despite the ongoing construction works in the axis and some other parts of the city), the number of motorists taking one-way in the axis would be reduced or even the practice totally phased-out.

“This is because when there is no traffic jam on one side of the highway, it will look strange for any driver to take one-way,” the don opined.

But there is an exemption to this analogy, according to him, and that is when the network of roads is poor.

He explained this by saying if a motorist is to make a U-turn but have to travel up to two to three kilometres. To do that, such motorist may be tempted to make use of a shorter route which is

one-way, especially when such a person is running out of time.

Caught in the act

Saturday Tribune observed that some motorists from Ijaiye and Ajala bus stop axis, Ojokoro, on the left side of Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway inward Abule-Egba, for example, often take one-way to connect the highway at Ahmaddiyya Bus Stop where there is a U-turn.

A driver of a car belonging to the Lagos Neighbourhood Safety Corps (LSNC), a community policing agency established by the Lagos State government, was seen plying one-way between Ajala and Ahmadiyya Bus Stop at about 1.35 p.m. on Monday, October 8.

The driver of the official car with registration number SMK 775 EQ would be required to go to Alakuko area, a distance of about three kilometres to make the U-turn without breaking the law, which he now, unlawfully, did in less than three minutes.

That is part of the system challenges usually encountered by the people of developing countries like Nigeria with poor network of roads, says Prof. Edewor.

“But that is not an excuse for anybody to flout traffic rules. So, as far as our unit is concerned, any driver caught flouting any traffic rule, especially driving on one-way would be tried in a mobile court and punished accordingly,” Task force boss, Egbeyemi, insisted.

The punishment, according to him, will continue to serve as a disincentive.

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