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Carnage on Lagos-Ibadan Expressway

Written by Chris Ajaero

Friday, 15 June 2012

Nearly 20 heavy duty vehicles burnt and many lives lost in multiple road accidents on Lagos-Ibadan Expressway

Horrific! This eight-letter word best captures the situation on the ever busy Lagos-Ibadan expressway between Thursday, May 31 and Friday, June 1, when multiple accidents involving petrol tankers occurred on the road during which 10 persons lost their lives. More than 24 vehicles were burnt. Several other persons also sustained varying degrees of injuries in the crashes.

For two days when the multiple crashes occurred near the Danco Filling station before the Sagamu Inter-change on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway, hundreds of sympathisers who massed round the gory scenes of the mishaps lamented over what they rated among the worst road accidents in Nigeria. They were indeed gory scenes as charred remains of human bodies and burnt vehicles littered on top of thick, black pool of liquid on that stretch of the notoriously hellish Lagos-Ibadan expressway.

The first multiple crash which took place at about midnight on Thursday, May 31 happened a few kilometres to the Sagamu Inter-change. *Newswatch* learnt that a trailer carrying some metal products rammed into one of the tankers parked on the side of the road. The impact caused an explosion. The trailer was said to be heading for Ibadan but when it got to the front of Danco Filling Station, it tried to manoeuvre between the trailers and tankers parked on both sides of the road. In the process, one of the metal products fell on one of the tankers and ruptured it. Fuel from the tanker caught fire and began to spread to other trailers. Within a twinkling of an eye, more than eight trucks went up in flames.

The incident caused a gridlock which stretched over several kilometres and crippled vehicular activities on the expressway as the burning vehicles blocked the Ibadan-bound lane of the highway. Road users spent four to five hours between Redemption Camp and Sagamu Inter-change between Thursday and Friday. Many road users had to divert to Old Lagos-Sagamu Road, which also led to a gridlock.

However, firefighters later came to the scene of the accident and battled the raging fire until they were able to put it off. But before then, about 10 persons had lost their lives.

Many people who sustained serious injuries were rushed to the Olabisi Onabanjo University Teaching Hospital, Shagamu for treatment.

As the fire fighters were balling to put off the fire, men of the Ogun State sector of the Federal Road Safety Corps, FRSC, officials of Bi-Courtney Highway Services as well as police and Civil Defence Corps officials were at the scene controlling traffic. The gridlock caused by the accident could not be evacuated until Friday, June 1.

But a few hours after the traffic jam was cleared, another fuel tanker explosion, which claimed 24 vehicles, occurred on the Lagos-Ibadan road. The tragedy occurred almost at the same stretch of the road like the one that happened on Thursday, May 31. Fifteen trucks, a luxury bus, five mini - buses, a car and two pick-up vans were burnt in the inferno.

Many motorists and their passengers who were coming from various religious camp grounds along the expressway were stranded. Among those who were stranded for about 10 hours in the resultant traffic congestion were Florence, the wife of Abiola Ajimobi, governor of Oyo State, and Ayo Odugbesan, a former deputy speaker of the Ogun State House of Assembly.

A fuel tanker had lost control while trying to overtake a lorry on the expressway. The tanker fell, on its back on the expressway and fuel started gushing out of its hold. The gushing fuel led to a fire that affected the other vehicles as the petrol in the 33, 000-litre tanker was spread all over the highway. While the fire was raging, huge billows of black smoke spiralled into the sky.

The fire spread to a very high number of vehicles on both sides of the expressway. While some of the vehicles were conveying diesel and petrol, a good number of the trucks were loaded with frozen fish, poultry feed, soya beans, bags of rice, and exotic drinks, all of which were destroyed in the inferno. Christiana Odafé, a rice dealer whose goods were destroyed by the fire, said she and her trading partner lost about N5 million to the fire, as the 600 bags of rice she was conveying to Warri got

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burnt in the fire. "Only a few bags could be rescued, and the soot and smoke from the fire damaged those, too," she said. Odafe lamented that travelling on the road has become a nightmare.

Demola Lawal, zonal commander of the FRSC for Lagos and Ogun states, expressed concern at the incident. He said while they were trying to evacuate the last burnt vehicles in an accident that happened the day before the second incident, a tractor punctured a tanker carrying PMS (petrol) and there was a gush and outflow of petroleum product spread all over the highway. Immediately this happened, they notified those on the queue that fuel had spilled all over the highway so that people could vacate their cars to escape. "That really assisted in not recording any casualty," he said.

Lawal explained that the presence of fire fighters at the scene helped in putting the raging fire under control. He said no life was lost while two persons who sustained injuries were taken to the Olabisi Onabanjo University Teaching Hospital, OOUTH, Sagamu for medical attention.

The carnage on the road was, however, cleared with weighty cranes just as several hundreds of passengers waited almost endlessly before continuing with their journeys.

Ibikunle Amosun, Ogun State governor, who later visited the scene of the incidents expressed shock at the extent of the carnage. He said it was regrettable that another accident of such magnitude occurred in less than 48 hours. He attributed the unending carnage on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway to the bad road whose reconstruction has been stalled for more than three years. Amosun, restated the urgent need for the federal government to collaborate with concerned state governments to fix the expressway so as to end the miseries of commuters and motorists. He said that the road accounts for 70 percent of movement of goods across the nation, and advised that its reconstruction should be handled by a competent professional with proven integrity and expertise.

Amosun, who recalled that the South-West governors met with President Goodluck Jonathan in Abuja, on Thursday, May 31, to discuss the condition of infrastructure in the region, said the president showed concern about deplorable state of the highway. *Newswatch* learnt that the meeting which was held at the Presidential Villa, Abuja, was attended by governors Amosun (Ogun); Olusegun Mimiko (Ondo); Kayode Fayemi (Ekiti); Rauf Aregbesola (Osun) and Abiola Ajimobi (Oyo).

Agitation by the South-West governors to have a say in the modernisation of the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway appears to have received positive attention from the federal government, which is said to be considering ceding 20 percent equity in the project to them. The states are Lagos, Ogun and Oyo, where the 109-kilometre road passes through.

Newswatch learnt that this was one of the recommendations made by the Infrastructure Concession Regulatory Commission, ICRC, in a proposal to the ministry on May 14, 2012.

The federal government had in May 2009, signed a concession agreement with Bi-Courtney Highway Services owned by Wale Babalakin for the reconstruction and expansion of the 105-kilometre road, under the Design, Build, Operate and Transfer arrangement. The project is aimed at improving substantially on the current geometric standards of the road; expand the carriageway into a limited access eight lanes divided highway between Lagos and the Sagamu interchange and a limited access of six lanes divided highway between the Sagamu interchange and Ibadan. In addition, modern expressway services and facilities which were expected to be introduced include dawn lighting, improved and new interchanges, a new drainage system, recessed service areas, lay-by emergency parking areas, footbridges in heavy pedestrian areas, weigh bridges, electronic traffic control and obligatory/informative signs. Under the DBOT, there will be no monetary cost to the government. Bi-Courtney was to raise all the required funding, largely through equity and long-term loans and to a much lesser extent, revenue generated from the operation of the highway.

The road, whose reconstruction was estimated to cost N89.5 billion, was scheduled to be run for 25 years by Bi-Courtney to enable it recoup its investment. However, more than three years after the agreement was signed, the implementation of the project, which was expected to begin immediately, had suffered a long delay due to a number of problems such as the adjustment and re-adjustment of its design; funding issue; securing the Right of Way; the issue of environmental and social impact; and the opposition by some state governments.

The debacle had prompted the President to raise an inter-ministerial committee to look into the knotty issues. The committee, comprising the ministries of Works and Justice, and ICRC, recommended a renegotiation of the concession agreement with Bi-Courtney to determine the new scope, funding, tolling, duration and other germane issues.

A statement from the office of the Special Adviser to the President (Media and Publicity), stated that "the President directed the ICRC and other relevant government ministries, departments and agencies to expedite action on efforts to resolve difficulties in the implementation of concession agreements, especially that of the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway."

It was further gathered that two options, renegotiation and buyout, had come out of the deliberations but that the committee eventually settled for the former because it offers a quick and reasonable solution to the problem.

Sources at the Presidency told *Newswatch* that Jonathan has approved the joint position of Mohammed Adoke, the attorney-general of the federation and minister of justice, Mike Onolemen, minister of works and Mansur Ahmed, director-general, ICRC, to constitute a technical committee to restructure/renegotiate the concession contract with the Bi-Courtney Consortium on the expressway concession.

But Dipo Kehinde, the head, communications and media relations, Bi-Courtney Highway Services, said he was not aware of any proposal to offer 20 percent equity to some state governments. He, however, said that the review of the concession agreement has been completed and the ministry has expressed satisfaction with the team raised by Bi-Courtney Highway Services for the project and the improvement made on the designs.

Kehinde said all the parties had agreed on the issue and that the project was expected to start fully before the end of the year. He explained that the road would now be operated for 30 years while funding will be coming from NAL Merchant Bank of South Africa.

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