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BUSINESS

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Industrial accidents: The story of Citizen Ibrahim

Exactly a week ago, Mr. Ibrahim Alli Mamo, an employee of a Lagos-based food processing company was alive and probably full of dreams. Having been working in an organisation owned by businessmen from an Asian country, Ibrahim must have been preparing his mind to save some money good enough to meet the rising cost of living in the country, especially, Lagos, where he worked and lived.

Unfortunately, such a dream was killed on Sunday by an unfriendly working environment. He was allegedly ground to death in the process of cleaning the company's dough molding machine. His friend, Idowu Suleman, who tried to save him, had his fingers chopped off in the failed rescue mission.

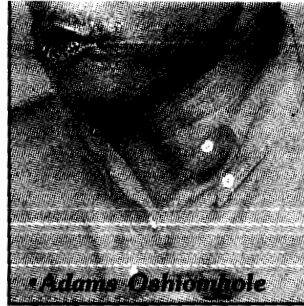
The tragic death, which was violently protested by his fellow workers in the company on Tuesday, has been played low, understandably by the owners of the business who are gaining notoriety for suppressing such protests. However, the incident has raised some questions, which the management has failed to answer. Why was Ibrahim, who was not in the maintenance department of the company, drafted to clean the machine despite the inherent danger? And why did the management fail to report the incident to the police immediately it occurred as alleged by the protesting colleagues of the deceased?

It is no longer a secret that some of the owners of these organisations have little or no regards for their Nigerian employees. How would one describe the horrifying episode at a plastic manufacturing firm in Odongunyan area of Ikorodu, Lagos State two years ago when scores of Nigerian workers lost their lives to an inferno at the company's factory? Some alleged that the deceased were locked up in the factory on the order of their employers, although the allegation was contested by the owners of the business.

The story was also told of a Nigerian who lost his life in a plastic manufacturing firm in Lagos. The victim, a casual worker, reportedly fell from a height of over 30 feet, which



one of the managers had forced him to climb, to effect some repairs. The young Nigerian's complaints that he was dizzy and that he was not a carpenter were reportedly ignored by his boss who, it was said, routinely saw nothing in putting his Nigerian workers at risk, especially if it would help



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cut cost.

Most of these organisations are nothing short of slave camps. They have many things in common. They produce similar products: zinc, iron rods, food and buckets. Because of their desperation to make quick money with little investments, an outdated technology is usually employed. In the process of production, not a few fingers of the badly paid employees are chopped off by machines or the entire limb severed, and when a human life is not lost, then it is human dignity. In most of these organisations, Nigerian workers are usually trapped in a dead-end job, on a misery wage per hour. In many instances, many of them must earn every kobo in a gruelling 12-hour non-stop shift.

Driven by such cases of fatality, loss of limbs and sundry industrial accidents are rarely reported - on account of intimidation and threats of sack. As a business reporter, I have participated in facility tours of some of these companies being run by some foreign investors and my experience has always raised some questions about the sincerity of the government to protect the dignity and lives of its citizens in the hands of these foreigners. What are the Nigerian directors in these organisations doing to improve the conditions of service in the organisations? This question is begging for an answer.

Inside the production hall of most of the companies visited, even a deaf and dumb person would need nobody to tell him that a tough business was going on. If he didn't hear the cranking of the not-so-modern machines, the frenzy movement of the sweating and almost naked Nigerian workers is an authentic image of purgatory. Working at a frenetic pace to correspond with the speed of fast-moving machines, workers, in most cases, don't go on break and enjoy no protection against harmful chemical and unsafe machines. Condemned to a living hell are those who work in the welding department as they are most times, subjected to intense heat from the fire in the furnace.

Do Nigerians have any choice? The answer is an emphatic no. One needs to visit some of the industrial estates and see how Nigerians mill around the gates of these companies, eating groundnut and bemoaning a wasted generation.