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Pipeline fire: 13 more die, 269 given mass burial. Pope, UN mourn

By Segun Olugbile

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No fewer than 13 of the remaining 37 victims of the Lagos pipeline explosion that were on admission at the Lagos State Teaching Hospital, Ikeja, have died.



Olaekan Adetayo

Burnt bodies being loaded into a truck at the scene of Tuesday's pipeline explosion in Abule Egba, Lagos... on Wednesday.



Olaekan Adetayo.

Council officials fumigating the scene.

This brought to 15 the number of those who died out of the 39 victims that were rushed to the teaching hospital after the incident on Tuesday.

Investigations conducted by one of our correspondents at the hospital on Wednesday revealed that the deceased died between Tuesday night and Wednesday morning.

As at Tuesday, 37 names of those on admission were pasted at the entrance of the Lagos State Emergency Management Service Ward of the hospital to help people identify the whereabouts of their affected relations.

But when the correspondent visited the hospital on Wednesday at about 1.30pm, the number had reduced to 24. Hospital sources said the names of the deceased had been deleted from the list.

It was, however, observed that the name of one of the dead victims, Christopher Benjamin, was on the list.

His brother, who identified himself as Grant, said that he was there around 2.30am when his brother died, adding that the corpse had been released to the family.

Though the hospital authorities admitted that some of the victims had died, they refused to give the number of the deceased.

The Chief Medical Director of the hospital, Dr. Femi Olugbile, told our correspondent to wait till Thursday (today) when the official position would be made known to the public.

Also, the LASUTH Public Relations Officer, Mrs. Ronke Famakinwa, said that some of the victims had died, but was quick to add that quite a few of the victims were responding to treatment.

"We have quite a number of them alive and we are doing everything medically possible within our means to keep them alive," she added.

She noted that the remains of some of the victims had been deposited at the morgue of the hospital while some had been released to their relations.

But sources at the hospital gave an indication that about 20 of those on admission might have died.

But Famakinwa denied the insinuation.

She said there were speculations because the hospital management had moved some of the victims to other hospitals in Lagos.

"Though we have lost some of them, the number is not up to 20 at all. If you did not see

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many of them, it is because we have moved some of them to other hospitals in order to give them the treatment that they need," she said.

One of the victims with 100 per cent burns was already bloated and a medical source doubted his survival.

However, some people who could not locate their relations besieged the hospital to see if they were on admission. A man, who identified himself as Udo, said he had been looking for his brother whose shop was burnt on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, the Minister of Petroleum, Dr. Edmund Daukoru, who visited the hospital to sympathise with the victims, was not allowed to see them by the hospital authorities.

Olugbile told Daukoru who visited the hospital in company with the Director, Department of Petroleum Resources, Mr. Tony Chukwueke, that exposing the victims was not good for their survival. However, the minister who was eventually received in the CMD's office, thanked the hospital management for its quick response to the disaster.

He said that the unfortunate incident would not have happened but for the activities of vandals.

However, Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday sent condolences to the victims of the explosion via telegram.

A telegram from the Vatican read, "Deeply saddened by reports of the tragic consequences of the pipeline explosion in Lagos, his holiness Pope Benedict XVI sends the assurance of his profound solidarity and pastoral concern."

"With fervent prayers that almighty God will grant eternal peace to those who have died and consolation and strength to the homeless and the injured. He invokes the divine gifts of wisdom, strength and peace upon the civil authorities and those engaged in the work of relief and rebuilding."

Also, the outgoing United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, expressed sadness at the news of the fuel pipeline explosion and pledged the world body's help in efforts to prevent other disasters from occurring in West Africa.

In a statement released by his spokesman on the blast, Annan extended his condolences to all those affected while noting that the theft of fuel from Nigerian pipelines had become a frequent occurrence, "often with tragic consequences."

The Secretary-General called for a review of Nigeria's fuel supply management, and of risks that could lead to other environmental or technological disasters in West Africa.

Annan, who completes his second and final five-year term at the end of this week, said, "The United Nations stands ready to assist in this endeavour, and to help in assessing current gaps in risk mapping and disaster response in the region."

But at Asom Hospital, where some of the fire victims were taken to, it was learnt on Wednesday that their relatives were relocating them when they were allegedly informed that the government was combing hospitals for the victims for possible prosecution.

A doctor in charge of the hospital said that some of the people admitted had been relocated by their relatives when they learnt that they were going to take them to court. "The people I have here are those who could not run away because of their conditions," he said.

However, most victims of the oil pipeline explosion received a mass burial early on Wednesday, a couple of kilometres (about a mile) away from the site of the fire, a Nigerian Red Cross official at the scene of the blaze said.

"Two hundred and thirty-eight bodies were buried overnight", Ige Oladimeji of the Lagos State Red Cross told the Agence France Presse on Wednesday afternoon.

He added that a second mass burial would be organised for the remainder, whose bodies were still in various hospital and clinic morgues.

The 238 were not buried in a cemetery but on a piece of land given by a local community, Oladimeji said.

Nigerian Red Cross Executive Secretary, Abiodun Orebiyi, said 269 people were known to have died in Tuesday's blast and added that scores of others had been injured.

Orebiyi said that the casualty figures could still rise.

However, health officials sprayed chemicals on Wednesday to disinfect the site of the oil pipeline explosion, according to the Nigerian Red Cross. Volunteers were also searching for more victims.

The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, the owner of the vandalised pipeline, said the latest toll for the blaze was "between 200 and 250."

"As at the last count, between 200 and 250 people have died in the disaster," the NNPC spokesman, Dr. Levi Ajuonuma, said in a television interview.

He described the victims as "criminals" who vandalised pipelines to steal petrol and sell it.






Ajuonuma said the police had been directed to hunt out those who tampered with the oil pipeline that caused the deadly explosion.

"The police are after them. They will be smoked out and prosecuted. Our security agents are advised to protect oil pipelines and other national properties and installations from vandals and criminals who steal petrol to sell," he said.

Ajuonuma also urged the public not to buy petrol from tankers on the road, adding that the current shortage in the country should not be an excuse for people to steal fuel.

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