

# Tanker fire kills 21 in P'Harcourt

## IBANGA ISINE

**N**O fewer than 21 people were feared dead after a tanker laden with fuel went up in flames at the Eleme Junction in the outskirts of Port Harcourt, Rivers State on Saturday.

At least 14 vehicles and several shops in the neighbourhood were razed.

Our correspondent noted that most of the bodies were burnt to ashes while limbs were seen littering the scene of the accident.

Details of the actual number of casualty were sketchy as at 9 pm on Saturday.

However, there were conflicting accounts about how the incident happened.

While witnesses claimed that the tanker skidded off the road and burst into flames during a chase by policemen, police authorities claimed nobody was chasing the driver.

The Commissioner of Police, Mr. Felix Ogbaudu, accused some mischief makers of giving a wrong account of the incident.

"Some mischief makers who said they were witnesses claimed that the tanker driver was being chased by the police but it is a lie.

"The driver is alive and has recounted what happened. It is purely an accident and nobody was chasing him.

"The driver is being interrogated by my men to find out what actually happened but the speculation that he was being chased by the police is

being carried by touts and mischief makers who claimed to be witnesses."

He said that four corpses were recovered from the scene of the incident, while 13 vehicles were burnt.

Witnesses said the accident occurred at about 12.15 am when the tanker, which was chased by a police patrol vehicle, skidded off the road and one of its tyres went off.

But a man, whose shop was burnt during the inferno, Mr. Emeka Ihedioha, said he was in the neighbourhood when he heard an explosion after midnight.

He said before he could get to his shop, the whole area was up in flames, consuming vehicles which were parked at the premises of the Transport Company of Anambra State.

"I was at home close by when I heard an explosion a little after midnight. When I came out to the junction, I saw that the whole environment was on fire.

"I was told that a police patrol vehicle was chasing the tanker driver when he skidded off the road and one of the tyres of his vehicle went off. It was apparently when the tanker fell that the explosion we heard occurred.

"Many people have died as a result of the incident but we can't tell the exact number because a lot of people slept inside their shops and inside the vehicles parked here.

"All the items in my shop have been burnt and I don't know how to start my life

again."

Mr. Matthew Eliagwu, who, also owned a shop at the site of the accident, corroborated Ihedioha's story but added that five corpses were recovered from the scene.

His account, "I saw five corpses lying by vehicles inside the park. Some persons might have been burnt to ashes because of the severity of the fire and the petrol which flowed into the area where the cars were parked.

"A police patrol vehicle was chasing the tanker driver for allegedly carrying condensate before it fell down and started burning people and vehicles and shops here."

Another victim of the fire, Mr. Orji Sidney, told *SUNDAY PUNCH* that he was sleeping inside one of the burnt shops when the explosion occurred.

Sidney said before he could open the door in order to see what happened, a large ball of fire was coming towards his shop.

He recounted, "I quickly ran out of the shop before the fire flowed inside and passed onto other shops in the neighbourhood. I sleep in the shop whenever I have some work to do.

"A lot of other people were still inside their shops and in vehicles belonging to the Anambra Transport Service when the incident occurred. Nobody knows what has

happened to these people. I sustained injuries while trying to escape but, on coming back, nothing was left in the shop.

A victim, who was severely burnt during the inferno, said that as soon as the tanker exploded, the patrol vehicle that was chasing the driver, made a u-turn and fled.

According to him, soldiers from the Joint Task Force guarding the premises of a major construction firm in the neighbourhood invited the fire service to the accident scene.

He said, "I don't know what happened but when I came out of my brother's shop, I saw the police van going back while fire was burning cars and shops here.

"I don't have any money to treat myself. I am waiting for my relations to come and take me to the hospital," the man lamented.

When contacted on the telephone, the Rivers State Police Command Public Relations Officer, Mrs. Ireju Barasua, said the command had received the report of the accident.

She, however, said that the Divisional Police Officer in charge of the area was yet to give an official account of what happened and the number of persons and property lost to the fire.

When told about witnesses' accounts that linked the police with the accident, Barasua said that she would not comment on that until the command was fully briefed by a relevant officer from the area.