



The building. Inset: Fatai's corpse

Petrol fire claims breadwinner's life, lands son, co-tenant in hospital

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Around 4 pm on Tuesday, a group of Islamic clerics gathered at 13, Gani Animashaun Street, Shasha, Lagos waxing philosophical as they tried to console the members of a bereaved family. But their efforts yielded little result as the family and sympathisers wailed uncontrollably.

The agony of the Sholeye family was understandable. They had just returned from Jafojo Cemetery where they buried Fatai, a 28-year-old member of the family who had been bubbling with life less than 24 hours earlier. Ismail, the son of the deceased and a man called Baba Aliyu, who had been a tenant in the house for more than 10 years, were lying in critical conditions at the intensive care unit of Gbobi Orthopaedic Hospital in Lagos, while the house that served as a shelter for the entire family had been consumed by fire, no thanks to the fuel crisis that had pervaded the country for many days.

"We cannot blame Allah. Let us just believe that everything happened with the knowledge of the Almighty," said Olalekan Sholeye as he held hands with two of his younger sisters.

The fire incident, as learnt, occurred around 11 pm on Monday, April 4, 2009 when Baba Aliyu, a petty

trader who also had a motorcycle, was trying to keep the four-litre keg of petrol in his room. "I was not in the house when the incident occurred, but what they told me was that Baba Aliyu was carrying a keg of petrol with one hand while he held a candle light in the other. I was told that he was about entering his room when the keg caught fire and exploded," said a member of the family, who identified herself as Ruka.

According to eyewitnesses, the fire caught Baba Aliyu's cloths, following which he threw the ball of fire into the passage and ran out of the house. Within minutes, the fire spread to other parts of the building, including the entrance of the room where Fatai and his son, Ismail slept. The little boy summoned up courage and waded through the fire, leaving his father behind.

Unfortunately, Fatai, could not escape.

The tenants in other rooms also escaped.

While the fire raged, the occupants of the house and their neighbours who feared that the fire could spread to their own apartments cried for help as they made efforts to quell the fire before the arrival of fire

servicemen.

"We tried to call fire servicemen, but no one had their number. We eventually managed to contact them, but before they arrived, serious damage had been done," a neighbour said, craving anonymity.

While the fire brigade men succeeded in putting out the fire and preventing it from spreading to the boys' quarters, the main building was totally consumed, while Fatai burnt beyond recognition.

Ismail and Baba Aliyu were rushed to a nearby private clinic, which was said to have rejected them. "We took them to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja, but the doctors were on strike. We also took them to Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Idi Araba, but there was no doctor to attend to us. One of the workers at the hospital advised us to take them to Igboji and that was where they were eventually admitted," Olalekan said.

The charred remains of Fatai was taken out of the house and placed on a partially burnt rug in front of it. While his father was said to have died about three years ago, his mother, who was said to have traveled to the North, was informed on the telephone about the tragic incident and the death of her son. "She was crying on the phone. She had started

making preparations to come down to Lagos and she asked us not to bury Fatai. But it was useless keeping the corpse of a child for the mother. Seeing the charred remains of her son would further add to her sorrow," a man who identified himself as one of the in-laws of the bereaved woman said.

Fatai being a Muslim, arrangements were immediately made for his burial and his body was interred around 2.30 pm.

According to Abibat Sholeye, a student of the University of Lagos and sister to the late Fatai, the deceased was until his death a commercial motorcycle rider. "He was actually a barber and had a barbing salon. But when he was finding things difficult, he had to venture into the commercial motorcycle business. Unfortunately, men of the Lagos State Transport Management Agency collected the motorcycle from him last week and asked him to pay N3,000. He had been trying to raise the money since and was only able to pay part of it before his untimely death," Abibat said.

According to her, the Baba Aliyu, a northerner, who caused the tragedy was brought into the house by one of his friends about 10 years ago.

"The man who actually rented a room from the landlord was called Audu. But later, he brought his friend in and introduced him to my father. Since then, the man has been living here while Audu himself has gone back to the north," Ruka said.

She also said that some of the tenants in the house had not paid the rents for several months. "They have been living here without paying their rents. Each time we asked them, they came up with one excuse or the other. See what they have caused now," she said, adding that before the incident, there were plans to give the tenants a quit notice and carry out some repair works on the house.

When *Saturday Punch* went round the house, burnt television sets, refrigerators, chairs, ceiling fans, pictures, clothes, shoes, stoves, cooking utensils and other household items littered the floor.

At Igboji Orthopaedic Hospital, our correspondent tried in vain to speak with Baba Aliyu and Ismail. "They cannot speak with you now; their conditions are still critical," a hospital official said, declining a request by our correspondent that she should identify herself.