

PDP rally: 20 die, 25 injured in stampede

CHUKWUDIAKASIKE and
IHUOMA CHIEDOZIE

•Jonathan orders full-scale investigation

THE Peoples Democratic Party's presidential campaign in the South-South geo-political zone was on Saturday marred by a stampede that led to the death of, at least, 20 persons.

No fewer than 25 other persons were injured during the rush at the rally, which took place at the Liberation Stadium in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital.

It was gathered that the commotion, which took place at one of the two gates of the stadium, was caused by the refusal of security operatives to open the gate for those who wanted to leave the arena through the main exit points, while President Goodluck Jonathan was still addressing the crowd.

An eyewitness told SUNDAY PUNCH that while initial entreaties to the security agents who were mainly soldiers, police and operatives of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps were rebuffed, they (security agents) decided to open the gate when another group of supporters surged towards the gate.

Some of those who streamed to the stadium decided to leave after confirming that their governorship candidates had been presented with flags.

The matter, according to another eyewitness account, was made worse when a policeman shot into the air to disperse the surging crowd, a development that made people at the gate push and trample on one another.

Many of the casualties were elderly women who came to show their support for their governors and the President.

Apart from the corpses that were seen on the ground at the front of the main gate to the stadium, shoes and slippers belonging to victims littered all over the place, while those who fainted as a result of the stampede were being revived by well-meaning Nigerians.

"It is surprising that this kind of thing could happen here. Two vehicles had already taken some of the corpses to the mortuary, while some are still lying dead on the ground," a PDP supporter, who preferred anonymity said.

Speaking on the incident, the State Police Public Relations Officer, Dr. Rita Inoma-Abbey, who confirmed the incident, told

SUNDAY PUNCH that the identities and numbers of the casualties were still unknown.

Inoma-Abbey said, "Today at about 2.50pm at the Liberation Stadium, Elekahia during the presidential campaign flag off for the South-South zone, lots of jubilant supporters were exiting the main gate that their governors have been given the PDP flags.

"Those coming in were pushing and those exiting were pushing their way out. In the ensuing stampede, so many people fell down. The police mounted troop, Police Mobile Force and other security agents contained

the push by closing the main gate to rescue the victims.

"Some were taken to the Police Clinic with police ambulance, while some were taken to Teme Clinic and Braithwaite Memorial Hospital for treatment."

Earlier, a presidential convoy that was on its way to the stadium was involved in an accident that claimed the lives of two persons.

The two unidentified persons, who were occupants of a Prado Jeep with Bayelsa number plate AX 176 KMK, reportedly rammed into a stationary truck on Port Harcourt-Aba Road.

Meanwhile, President Jonathan has ordered a full-scale investigation into the

causes of the stampede.

The President in a statement signed by his Senior Special Adviser (Media), Mr. Ima Niboro, said the incident was "unfortunate and regrettable."

Niboro said the President was not only mourning with the families of the victims but also heavily weighed down by the incident.

The statement reads, "President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan has received with shock and sadness, news of the unfortunate loss of some lives due to a stampede at the Port Harcourt Liberation Stadium, during the flag off of the South-South Presidential campaign.

"The President mourns

with the families of the deceased, and prays the almighty to grant repose to their souls.

"President Jonathan notes with a heavy heart, that these are persons who came to celebrate his success at the primaries of the PDP, and wish him well in the coming elections.

"I am sad, and heavily weighed down by this incident. It is sad, unfortunate and regrettable. I mourn with those who mourn tonight. May God grant us all the fortitude to bear this irreparable loss," he said.

"The president has directed a full scale investigation into the cause of the stampede that led to the unfortunate loss of some lives."



•L-R: Governor Rotimi Amaechi of Rivers State, President Goodluck Jonathan, Vice President Namadi Sambo and Senate President, David Mark at the presidential campaign of the Peoples Democratic Party, in Port Harcourt... on Saturday

We must prove a point with April poll —Mark

SEGUN OLATUNJI

THE President of the Senate, David Mark, on Saturday in Kaduna said Nigeria must use the forthcoming elections scheduled for April to prove to the international community that it has the capability to conduct credible polls.

Mark stressed that the April elections would provide Nigeria the opportunity to demonstrate that its democracy had got to the point where it could, through the Independent National Electoral Commission, conduct the elections whose results would be acceptable to all.

The Senate president

stated this while speaking at the opening of a two-day conference on Religious Harmony for Good Governance organised by the Islamic Resource Centre and the Community Renaissance Co-Existence and Re-Oriented Initiative.

He called on all Nigerians to cooperate with the relevant authorities to ensure the peaceful conduct of the forthcoming elections.

Mark said the forthcoming polls should be devoid of violence, bloodshed, stressing that this would open the doors of opportunities to every Nigerian.

He added that the polls should be one in which all

"Nigerians would agree to disagree" rather than resorting to violence and bloodshed to settle their grievances.

Mark, who was represented by the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Inter-Parliamentary Affairs, Senator Abdulazeez Usman, urged all to work hard to ensure the conduct of peaceful elections by shunning all acts that could be inimical to the growth of democracy and the country.

He described Nigerians as hard working and resilient, adding that there must be concerted efforts to ensure the success of the polls.

Earlier, the Chairman of the Organising Committee,

Dr. Aminu Al-Amin, noted that Nigeria would have been a greater nation after 50 years of independence if there were social cohesion and good governance at all levels.

Al-Amin decried the series of crises in some parts of the country, especially in the Niger Delta, Borno, Abuja, Plateau and Bauchi states.

He pointed out that these crises had resulted in the breakdown of social cohesion among the people, adding that the aim of the conference was to explore the opportunities presented by the two major religions in the country—Christianity and Islam—to bring about harmony and good governance.