

# Explosion, multiple fire outbreaks in Port Harcourt

**Chukwudi Akasike,  
Port Harcourt**

**T**here was tension in Port Harcourt on Friday as residents of the Rivers State capital witnessed a cocktail of fire incidents in four different locations.

While residents around Abuloma Jetty were jolted by the explosion of a vessel that claimed the lives of at least 30 persons, workers of Rivers State Newspaper Corporation lost property worth millions of naira as fire gutted the second floor of *The Tide* Newspaper building located on Ikwerre Road.

Also, the Engineering Department of a Port Harcourt-based radio station, *Rhythm FM*, was razed by an early morning fire that had made the station to go off air.

At Eneka, operatives of the Joint Military Task Force

- 30 feared dead in vessel explosion
- *Tide* Newspaper, *Rhythm FM* premises affected
- JTF sets five tankers ablaze

codenamed 'Operation Pulo Shield' set fire to five tankers loaded with illegally refined oil, completing the blend of fire incidents in Port Harcourt in a day.

On the explosion of a vessel at the Abuloma Jetty, it was gathered that the occupants of the ship, excluding three persons who escaped, were dead.

An eyewitness, who identified himself as Gideon, told *SATURDAY PUNCH* that members of the crew, some ladies suspected to be students of tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt, were among those who lost their lives in the explosion.

The ladies, according to

Gideon, were on their way to spend the weekend with their friends and relatives offshore before they met their untimely death.

A resident of Abuloma, Mr. Jame Israel, who witnessed the incident, said the blast occurred about 9.30 am as a result of the maintenance work being carried out in the vessel by welders.

"The welders were trying to seal an opening to block a leakage on the deck of the vessel's fuel tank and in the process, the vessel exploded. The welders died, but we cannot ascertain how many people died inside the vessel," Israel added.

Another eyewitness, who identified himself as Ifeanyi, said the explosion threw one of the welders above the vessel before he (welder) landed into the fire that sent a heavy smoke into the air.

"I saw it; the impact of the explosion pushed one of the person suspected to be the welder very high before he landed back into the fire. The explosion caused the buildings around this place to vibrate.

"When we heard the sound, we initially thought it was a bomb blast from a terrorist group. But we later learnt that the explosion occurred as a result of the welding work being done in the ship," Ifeanyi said.

The Rivers State Commander of the Federal Road Safety Commission, Kayode Olagunju, said, "An oil vessel around 9.45 hours

caught fire and exploded at the Abuloma Waterfront in Port Harcourt.

"The fire is still restricted to water areas. FRSC, NEMA, police, fire service and other rescue agencies are on the ground. Casualty figure is not yet known. We shall keep you posted."

The state Coordinator of the National Emergency Management Agency, Mr. Emenike Umesi, said the agency did not get any casualty figure.

Umesi told *SATURDAY PUNCH* that it was not certain if people were trapped in the vessel, promising that figures of casualties would soon be released.

At *The Tide* office, the editor of the paper, Mr. Soye Jamabo, said fire gutted the second floor of the building about 2 am, destroying vital documents.

Jamabo added that fire

fighters across the road tried to put out the fire to no avail as their pipe was not long enough to get to the second floor of the building.

Similarly, the state Chairman of the Nigeria Union of Journalists, Mr. Okpaka Dokubo, explained that the state-owned fire service officials were helpless as their equipment failed them at a critical time.

"The fire fighters came, but their equipment was ineffective. Their water pipe could not go beyond the first floor of the building. If not for the intervention of fire fighters from Total, the entire building would have been razed," Okpaka stated.

The state Commissioner for Information and Communication, Mrs. Ibim Semenitari, who visited *Tide*, was said to have directed workers to go home pending when they would get instructions from the government.

In another development, JTF operatives had set five tankers loaded with suspected illegally refined oil on fire in Atali on Rumuokwursi-Igwuruta Road.

The JTF troop had impounded the five tankers within the area in the night and had directed that they should be driven to the bush where they were set ablaze.

It was gathered that the JTF ignored entreaties from residents that buildings around the area could be affected by the fire.

Spokesperson for the JTF, Operation Pulo Shield, Capt. Sunday Samuel, said the tankers were involved in illegal bunkering, adding that the mandate of the JTF was to destroy products seized from illegal bunkers.

Samuel stated that six persons were arrested in the process of impounding the tankers, adding that the suspects would soon be handed over to appropriate authorities for further investigation and prosecution.

## Soldiers, police sack PHCN offices

**Everest Amaefule, Fidelis Soriwei, Abuja; and Stanley Opara**

**A** contingent of the Nigerian Army and the police were on Friday deployed to take over the headquarters of the Power Holding Company of Nigeria over a dispute with the Federal Government on their pension.

The soldiers, numbering about 50, stormed the headquarters of PHCN in the early hours of Friday and took strategic positions before workers could resume for work.

When our correspondent visited the place, the soldiers had sealed the entrance to the premises located in Maitama.

The workers were

- We won't return to work until soldiers are withdrawn – Workers
- Withdraw soldiers, NLC tells FG

restricted to the street as they were not allowed to enter the building. Some of them converted the ambulance of PHCN to a music station that entertained both staff and passersby.

Chairman of the National Union of Electricity Employees, FCT chapter, Mr. Wisdom Nwachukwu, regretted that soldiers could take over the headquarters of the company during a civilian administration.

He told *SATURDAY PUNCH* that the soldiers asked any worker that wanted to enter the building to fill a pension form.

Nwachukwu said, "The Federal Government appointed Hassan Sunmonu to mediate between the workers and the government on labour issues before the privatisation of the PHCN successor companies. The last meeting that held last month ended in a deadlock.

The Minister of Power, Prof. Bath Nnaji, had while inaugurating an investigative panel on the PHCN pension scheme on Wednesday, said the scheme running in PHCN was illegal and contrary to Pension Reform Act of 2004.

He said while

negotiating with workers on their severance terms, the Federal Government discovered that the pension scheme was not being properly run, thus necessitating the inauguration of the panel.

Responding to questions from newsmen on the issue, Nnaji said reforms must go on, adding that anybody that stood in the way of reforms in the power sector was against the progress of the nation.

Meanwhile, the FG has told a high powered United States' delegation that there was no power alignment in the power stations conceived and started by past administrations and attributed this to the seeming intractable challenges in the electricity sector.

"We still need support,"

Nnaji told the delegation led by the Deputy Assistant to the President of United States, Dr. Michael Froman, a former Managing Director of Citigroup.

Also, the Nigeria Labour Congress called on the FG to withdraw soldiers from the facilities of the PHCN and begin dialogue with the workers.

The President of the NLC, Mr. Abdulwahed Omar, observed in a statement on Friday that negotiations between the FG and the National Union of Electricity Employees had broken down as a result of unresolved labour issues.

However, the National Assembly has scheduled a meeting with labour on Monday to find a lasting solution to the problem.