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Black spots: Dash of death on Lagos highways



Dash of death on Lagos highways

A number of schoolchildren on their way to and from school have been knocked down by vehicles in recent times. In this report, ARUKAINO UMUKORO writes about the perils of not having pedestrian bridges in areas where schools are concentrated

Although a few years apart, they were so close as siblings that they ended up in the same class and sharing the same desk.

But when 15-year-old JSS III student, Jesumo Bazy, resumes for the next school session, her sister, Adesolange, will not be sitting by her side in the classroom at the State New High School, Bereko, Badagry, Lagos State.

The sibling bond was painfully severed by a fast-moving vehicle on the Bereko end of the busy Lagos-Badagry Expressway, which claimed the life of Adesolange and injured three of her schoolmates, including Jesumo.

Death came calling on the day the two sisters were billed to start their Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination. A fast moving vehicle rammed into the pupils who were about crossing from one side of the highway where their school was located to the other side of the road. Adesolange died on the spot.

“The accident occurred on a Wednesday in June when we were about to write Mathematics in our JSSCE. I can’t even remember how it happened. I just saw myself at the General Hospital, Badagry. I was injured on my face and side. I was in the hospital for more than a week,” Jesumo told *SUNDAY PUNCH*.

“My sister and I went to school together, played together, and even sat at the same desk. I will feel sad when I don’t see her by my side when I get back to school. She told me that she would join the Arts class in senior secondary school. I would like to be a scientist. I think she would have wanted to become a banker.”

A tale of incidents

On July 10, a few weeks after that incident, three schoolchildren of the Anglican Primary School II, Ijanikin, were knocked down by a commercial bus at the Ijanikin end of the Lagos-Badagry Expressway.

Eyewitnesses said the schoolchildren were hit by the bus in the morning while attempting to cross the road to get to their school. It was said that a Good Samaritan had assisted the schoolchildren in crossing the first lane of the busy road. But while attempting to do the same on the second lane, an impatient driver ran over the children, killing them on the spot.

The accident took place near the Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, which has a

pedestrian bridge close to it, and is about a few hundred metres from the Anglican School.

At the time of this report, the whereabouts of the driver is unknown.

Like State New High School, Bereko, Anglican Primary School II is also located on one side of the expressway.

When *SUNDAY PUNCH* visited the school, the remains of the commercial bus, which was burnt by angry protesters, could be seen at the median of the road.

Mr. Olamide Timothy, father of one of the pupils killed in the accident, 14-year-old Odu, described the accident as avoidable if there was a pedestrian bridge very close to the school.

"I feel terrible about what happened. My son would have still been alive. The government should do something about this to help us protect our children," said Timothy, a carpenter.

One of the pupils of the Anglican Primary school, Kayode, told our correspondent that some of his schoolmates narrowly escaped death a week before the accident that claimed Odu's life.

They were also about crossing the road.

Another pupil said a woman and her baby were almost knocked down by a fast-moving car at the same spot when they also wanted to cross the road recently.

"We ate plantain chips the night before he was killed in the accident" said 14-year-old Aina Odunola, who said he was close to the late Odu.

The principal of State New High School and the head teacher of Anglican Primary School II declined to speak with *SUNDAY PUNCH*, stating that they were civil servants and are not authorised to speak with the press on the matter.

"I'm sad about what happened. But I also thank God my son is alive. Accidents do happen, but a pedestrian bridge would help protect our children when they cross the road from school," said Mr. James Eze, Miracle's father, a commercial motorcyclist.

A father's grief, a mother's hope

Jesumo and Adesolange's father, Mr. Ado Bazy, is still in shock over the incident. He showed our correspondent a picture of his daughter after the accident. Her body and face were mangled. The picture was too graphic to be published.

"If I had seen the driver who caused the accident that very day, I would have killed him. But now, I won't tell him anything even if I see him now, I leave everything to God," Bazy said in an emotion-laden voice.

A sand seller, Bazy said he wanted good education for his daughters, since he did not have one, but he said it was cut short by an incident that could have been prevented.

He said, "What has happened has happened. If there was a pedestrian bridge there, maybe the accident won't have happened and my daughter would still be alive today."

"I am frustrated and depressed. Since my daughter died, I can't go to work again because of depression. I think a lot about her, the incident has increased my blood pressure. I told her that day to go to school and ensure that she face her studies because it would help her in future."

Adesolange's mother was too distraught to speak with our correspondent.

Jesumo added, "The government should help us get people to help us to cross and build a pedestrian bridge for us. I was lucky to survive."

Thirteen-year-old Miracle Eze, a JSS III student of State New High School, was also lucky to survive the accident. When *SUNDAY PUNCH* visited his parents at Seme, the Republic of Benin, a border town close to Badagry, his mother, Mrs. Caroline Eze, said he had gone to receive treatment for his broken arm.

Eze, a food seller, said the doctors at a hospital in Seme told her that her son may require a

surgery because of the severity of the injury to his arm. “I don’t know how much the surgery would cost, but the doctors told me to come next week. He cannot use the hand to sweep, or raise heavy objects,” she said.

“I hope my hand can heal quickly so that I can return to school with my mates,” Miracle, who wants to become an engineer, said when he returned.

“I have spent over N50,000 on his treatment at hospitals in Nigeria and Benin Republic. It has affected my business but I thank God that he is alive. I will spend more since he will have to take the JSSCE examination next year,” said Eze, who added that she has four children enrolled in the school.

She said, “I pray before they depart for school every morning and ask God to protect them on their way to and from school. If there was a pedestrian bridge there, maybe this accident won’t have happened. The government should build one for the schoolchildren and others in the area to use. It would prevent further accidents.”

‘Please, build us a bridge’

All the schoolchildren who spoke to *SUNDAY PUNCH* in the two schools said they would like to see a (pedestrian) bridge constructed opposite or near their school.

“This is because the ‘traffic’ (road crossing) guards are not there all the time,” said Bode, a Primary Four pupil. Our correspondent gathered from the other pupils that one of the pupils who died in the accident was named Taiye. “He was in Primary Four,” said one Primary Six pupil.

At the time of his report, the parents of the said pupil could not be reached.

Rachel, a JSS II student of State New High School, said while the crossing guards try their best in assisting the schoolchildren in crossing the busy road, they have their limitations. “They are there in the morning, during resumption time, and in the afternoon, at closing time, but they cannot prevent a vehicle from speeding,” she said.

“A pedestrian bridge or zebra crossing near our school would prevent such accidents,” said Paul, a student in SSS I.

“We discussed this issue (construction of a pedestrian bridge) at the parents meeting with the school (management) some few weeks ago, when we went to collect our children’s report cards. It’s not like we don’t have schools in Seme, but I love this school. The school said they would do it but they want the government to help them do it,” noted Mrs. Eze.

A record of deaths

Like Bazy, Timothy and Eze, other parents who spoke to *SUNDAY PUNCH* agreed that building a pedestrian bridge across the road close to schools near highways would go a long way to prevent accidents on these spots in the future.

The death of schoolchildren from such accidents is common, especially if the school is located on one side of a busy road, noted a child safety enthusiast, Mr. Sola Ogunsola.

Ogunsola, who organises road safety initiatives for children and plans to republish his book on the same subject, said, “In Ikorodu, a densely populated area in Lagos, you see these incidents often because many of these schools are located near the road side. Ordinarily, there are supposed to be zebra crossings or pedestrian bridges on the road in such areas. But since there is none, what happens most of the time is that, parents park at one side of the road and ask the children to cross to the other side.

“It’s very difficult controlling the commercial motorcyclists, despite the ban on motorcycles, as there have been incidents involving them, or other vehicles hitting these children when they

attempt to cross the road. In some of these areas, residents have taken it upon themselves to construct speed breakers across the road to prevent that. Despite that, there have been several cases. A particular accident happened last year, where two children from the same father were killed while trying to cross the road.”

Also, in November, last year, a truck ran over three primary school pupils at the Ikota end of the Lekki-Epe Expressway, Lagos State.

The children, who were between the ages of five and 11, and on their way to school, were waiting at the median to cross to the other side of the expressway when they were knocked down by a truck. It also caused a serious protest and traffic jam in the area as one of the children reportedly died on the spot. Eyewitnesses also said the untimely death could have been avoided if there was a pedestrian bridge in the area.

“One major thing that the government needs to work on is to provide crossing guards for such schools close to the expressways, like they have in the US or the UK. Every school that is on the road must have a road crossing guard,” Ogunsola advised.

When *SUNDAY PUNCH* visited State New High School, Badagry, two crossing guards were seen assisting the students to cross the busy road after closing.

“They assist us in the morning and afternoon, but they were not around when that incident happened,” said one JSS II student.

Our correspondent noticed that not all the students had dispersed before the crossing guards called it a day and left the remaining students to cross the road on their own.

This is one of the reasons why Ogunsola said simply having crossing guards is not enough and that there was need for attitudinal change on the parts of motorists and road users.

“Having road crossing guards is good, but it is not enough, zebra crossings and pedestrian bridges are also important. Although the law says once you approach or see someone step on a zebra crossing, you are supposed to slow down, but how many motorists usually stop at such junctures? It boils down to orientation and education and attitude. More awareness needs to be raised about this issue.”

Ogunsola further said the population density of that area, as well as the vehicular traffic and other road users, should be considered in road design and construction.

He said, “Areas with high population density should get more than a casual road. Also, constructing a road in a highly populated area without a pedestrian bridge means there could be more casualties and accidents there. We should incorporate safety issues into our road designs and construction, safety should be a part of our lives and the road builders should incorporate these in their planning road construction.”

Although there have been concerns that many Lagosians shun the use of pedestrian bridges on the major highways in the state, many parents believe that having them in areas where schools are located is vital for their children’s safety.

Need for more road infrastructure

The Lagos State Sector Commander of the Federal Road Safety Commission, Mr. Chidi Nkwonta, said the commission had marked out areas with a high population density, which he called built-up areas.

When our correspondent prodded him on the incidents in Ijanikin and Badagry, he said, “These areas, where accidents are likely to happen or have been happening due to an engineering deficiency or infrastructure deficiency, are called black spots. There is a law that says zebra crossings/pedestrian bridges should be built in such areas, places with high population density,”

Nkwonta told *SUNDAY PUNCH*.

He further said, “We advise the appropriate authorities, the ministry of works, to build pedestrian crossings around those areas, where schools are located on the highways, and schoolchildren are made to dash across the road.”

Despite the infrastructural challenges, Nkwonta said the FRSC was already working with schools and the ministry of education to sensitise them about the use of pedestrian bridges and zebra crossings.

He said, “We do regular public enlightenment in schools and what we call catch-them-young programmes. Road Safety has now been embedded in the curriculum of primary and junior secondary schools, it is meant to sensitise and educate the children, so that they have a good road safety culture as they grow. We are always talking to them. Also, there are road safety clubs in schools, we also collaborate sometimes with child-based non-governmental organisations.”

“We have marked out all such places and advised the Federal Ministry of Works. Periodically, we visit these designated roads and black spots and we suggest where safety features ought to be located. You know these aspects of infrastructure are still developing, and they are being done incrementally. So, I know they would build these in all these places very soon.”

When asked about the statistics of road accidents linked to the lack of pedestrian bridges, Nkwonta said he would get back to our correspondent.

When contacted, the Public Relations Officer, Lagos State Ministry of Education, Mr. Jide Lawal, said that the state government was working to put these infrastructure in place in many areas.

He said, “It is the ministry of transportation that is in charge of zebra crossings, while the ministry of works takes care of pedestrian bridges. But I’m sure that everyone (in government) is working, not only for schoolchildren, but for all Lagosians. Generally, the Lagos State government has made it a mark of duty to put these things in place. Also, if you go round Lagos, you would notice that pedestrian bridges are springing up here and there.

“Even if these accidents didn’t occur, I think that the Lagos State government, on its own, is already putting these structures in place, without being prompted by the facts that accidents occurred there. There have been markings for zebra crossing and pedestrian bridges (in other areas); but it’s for people to obey it. What if the zebra crossing is done and people don’t obey it? Some motorists don’t bother to stop. I think that should be the issue.

“Zebra crossing or pedestrian bridges are not something that you just manufacture in a flash. It’s a continuous process. Zebra crossing markings are all over the place. If they don’t have that in these particular places that you have mentioned, sooner rather than later, they would get there.”

Last year, at a press briefing organised to commemorate the 2013 United Nations Global Road Safety Week, the Lagos State Commissioner for Transportation, Comrade Kayode Opeifa, said that the safety of all road users was a priority for the state government. He also said that the state government has evolved several policies and programmes aimed at realising the UN five pillars of activities with regards to road safety. These include the establishment of road safety clubs in over 700 public and private schools to spread the message of safety on the roads, installation of road infrastructure to enhance road transport safety usage and traffic management efficiency and provision of over 200 pedestrian crossings at deserving locations.

One of the five UN pillars, safer roads and mobility, states that, at a national level countries are

encouraged to “raise the inherent safety and protective quality of road networks for the benefit of all road users, especially the most vulnerable (e.g. pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcyclists).” It further states that, “This will be achieved through the implementation of various road infrastructure agreements under the UN framework, road infrastructure assessment and improved safety-conscious planning, design, construction and operation of roads.”

According to the *UN Global Plan for the Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011-2020*, road traffic injuries are among the three leading causes of death for people between five and 44 years of age, which it said was, in part, a result of rapid increases in motorisation without sufficient improvement in road safety strategies and land use planning.

The report added that road traffic injuries can be prevented when “effective interventions include incorporating road safety features into land-use, urban planning and transport planning; designing safer roads and requiring independent road safety audits for new construction projects.”

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