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Blood, tears in chambers of steel (1)

JUNE 11, 2015 : FOLASHADE ADEBAYO 1 COMMENT

Like 0 g+1**Toxic emissions settle over Oruku**

| credits: Folashade Adebayo

Deaths, injuries and environmental degradation are the silent trend in Nigeria's steel industry, writes FOLASHADE ADEBAYO

James Sunday was heating iron scraps in the furnace unit of the Metal Africa Steel Company, Oruku, Ogun State, in 2012 when a running engine seized his right leg. Predictably, the 25-year-old struggled to break free. But he could not match the automated power of the device. It mauled his right leg and thigh, eventually pulling off his left arm onto the floor of the furnace room.

A 'lone wolf' incident, the community did not hear a sound (which usually accompanies explosions resulting from industrial accidents), until the next morning. By that time, Sunday was lying almost lifeless at a private hospital in Odogunyan, a nearby community, with his young wife and Sunday, his only son, by his side. He was still at the said hospital, one week later, when he breathed his last.

Sitting on his mother's legs on June 2, 2015, in a makeshift kitchen built outside their home in Oruku, the younger Sunday, 3, coughed repeatedly. His mother said it was not a reaction to the smoke rising from the dying embers of a local stove nearby, but to an untreated chest infection.

Ever since losing their breadwinner, money to pay for medical necessities has become a luxury for this small family. Apart from her husband's hospitals bills, Elizabeth, 24, claimed no monetary compensation was paid to the family almost three years after his death.

"I have been going to the company ever since my husband died. Nobody paid me any money. It has been a case of 'Come today, come tomorrow'. So, I stopped going there. All I have been doing is to help my mother to sell fufu — a local staple made from cassava. Although my husband was a casual worker, I feel sad that there is nothing to help my son or to start our lives afresh," she said.

Similarly, the grass promised to be greener in Lagos when Lucky Idoko left his village in Benue State to work in Reel Steel Company, also within the Oruku environs, as a casual worker in 2011. Melting tons of iron scraps under unpredictable and dangerous conditions, Idoko, 33, and other casual workers earned N1,000, (\$5) daily, for their sweat. He toiled in the oven of liquid fire for two years, working three shifts in a day, until July 2013 when an industrial accident popped out his two eyes in the Finishing Unit. Instantly, the golden dream he pursued to Lagos transited to a colossal tragedy.

Aside a sum of N183,000 paid to the hospital to cover his medical expenses, James' half-brother, Emmanuel Idoko, told our correspondent a few weeks ago that the company had yet to pay compensation claims to the family.

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He further said, "His wife and son are still in the village as I am talking to you. They cannot even raise money to come back to Lagos after the burial. The N183,000 paid last year was spent on his treatment at the hospital. Although he was discharged in 2013, he was never himself till he died last March," he claimed.

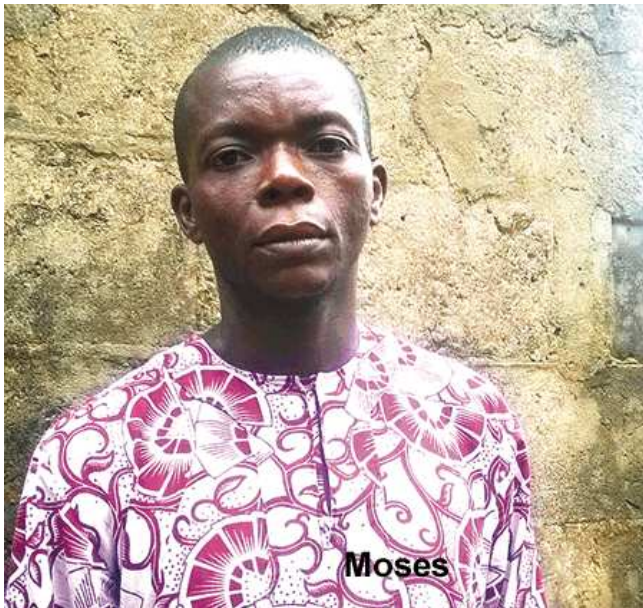
A deluge of disabilities

Aside fatal accidents in which workers unceremoniously lose their lives, our correspondent has learnt that there are cases of non-fatal accidents and permanent disabilities where victims are practically left to die in mushroom hospitals.

Although, the Ikorodu General Hospital is only a few kilometers away from these firms, wounded workers in critical conditions are rarely taken there.

For instance, seven workers who were burnt to death in an industrial accident at Phoenix Steel Mills Limited, Ogijo, in 2012 were spirited to Rolayo and Jobi Hospitals, in the Benson Area of Ikorodu. The tragedy, which shook the community, forced the Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity to shut down the company for two weeks.

A former worker with Metal Africa Steel Company, Mr. Ogooluwa Moses, made it to a maternity hospital when an overhead crane landed on his right foot in the Rolling Unit of the company in 2013. Although an industrial boot could have saved him the pain, Moses, who earned N900 daily at the time, was not provided with any personal protective equipment.



"We were working in the rolling steel unit when a crane landed on my leg," he said. "I was in severe pain and the company rushed me to Idera Maternity Hospital in Odogunyan. I was there for one month and seven days. The company picked the bill but when I was discharged, I was at home for another three months nursing my wounds at my own expense. I was not paid a kobo as compensation."

The same fate befell Hassan Bichi (pseudonym), a casual worker with Monarch Steel Company, Oruku. Bichi, who craved anonymity because he still works for the organisation, said he was also smelting a pot of hot steel scraps last

year, without the protection of a PPE, when the molten steel splashed on his left arm, instantly changing the colour of the limb from dainty fair to crispy black. He retreated in agony, but the flakes of wild fire did not miss a beat, licking the giant pot containing 20 tons of iron.

However, the sting and smell of burning flesh could only buy the casual worker some days off work. He said he was back to duty two weeks after being treated for third-degree burns at the expense of the firm.

Cutting their noses to spite their faces

Bichi and Moses' experience is the reality for many young men and women living in communities along the Ikorodu-Sagamu road. These not-so-blue-collar communities include Oruku, Ipetero, Likosi, Ewoloye, Odonla, Gbaga, Odogunyan and a few others.

Findings by our correspondent showed that about 15 steel companies operate in those areas. While four of them are located within the Oruku environs, six operate within Odonla/Odongunyan community.

Good roads, potable water, constant electricity as well as job opportunities are a luxury in these areas, which fall within the boundary of Ogun and Lagos States. But, with hundreds of casual workers on their payroll, the steel-producing companies are the biggest employers of labour and wield considerable influence on the lives and wellbeing of the communities.

But death is also cheap there. Unprotected from the elements and working without the provision of standard safety equipment, many of the firms may have become a tomb for many caught up in grisly industrial

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accidents.

According to Moses, they were not provided with any safety kit.



Elizabeth and her son

"At least, I remembered that I was not wearing any overall or gloves when a crane fell on me. I also know that the practice has not changed. We were treated with disdain by our employers. Personally, I had to leave when I realised my life was in danger," he said.

A typical steel-producing company has three major departments: administrative, technology and production, which are further split into a number of units. This reporter learnt that the production department, which has furnace, casting, rolling mill and finishing units, is the most dangerous departments where accidents usually occur. Some of the activities undertaken in these units include grinding, smelting, chiselling, hammering, welding and spraying.

A study of 107 steel rolling workers conducted by the Department of Ophthalmology, University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital, has shown that besides death, permanent disabilities are also a real occupational risk.

The researchers, led by Dr. Dupe Ademola-Popoola, reported that workers were at a high risk of serious injuries to their eyes and even death caused by flying particles, metal chips, explosion from liquid metals, furnace light and others.

"107 steel rolling workers were surveyed for eye-protection practice, previous eye injuries and present ocular (visual) status. Half of the workers possessed eye protective devices, EPD. However, 31.6 per cent of them never used it. Of the latter, 68.9 per cent reported a history of work-related eye injuries: eight cases at the drilling unit (12.9 per cent), 18 at welding (29 per cent), 13 at grinding (21 per cent) and 23 cases at other work processes (37.1 per cent)).

Ademola-Popoola and her team therefore submitted that standard safety equipment in a steel company, such as eye-protective devices, safety garments, belts and helmets, among others, be provided for workers, while the rule is to be enforced by managers.

Pains, gains of an industry

The Head, Corporate Affairs, Universal Steel, Lagos, Mr. David Igwe, said impurities from the scraps, which are collected from vendors, are sources of pollution to the soil, water and air, posing short and long term dangers to humans, plants and animals.

But the hazard meter starts to run hours before delivery, when trucks containing dirty and greased scraps spread dust particles while driving to the companies. The chain continues when the scraps, which are typically smeared with grease and other chemical solvents, are delivered.

Rather than dumping them on bare ground, Igwe said standard procedure dictates that the scraps are ideally kept on a concretised scrapyard. The pathway to danger, both to the workers and the environment, continues when actual melting operation starts in the furnace unit. Particles and impurities within the scraps are melted with extreme heat, producing steaming molten steel which emits toxic gases and carcinogens into the atmosphere.

Columnists



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Killing softly with toxic smoke

A thick, black fume rose from two points on the roof of the Top Steel Company, to the clear sky on March 16, fouling the air over Odonla, a community near the Ikorodu-Sagamu road. Travelling in the direction of the wind, the billows of smoke moved into the community, settling over buildings, cars, humans and clothes hung out in the sun to dry.



Residents said this had been the practice for many years in the community where at least five steel companies emit toxic smoke residue from melted scrap steel into the air. Our correspondent, who visited the community on several occasions, observed toxic smoke rising not only from the chimneys of Top Steel Company, Sunflag Steel Company, African Steel Company and some other steel companies in the area, the emissions escape unhindered through gaps of their roofs into the atmosphere.

In one breath, a community leader, Mr. Kolawole Adekunle, said he would not have ventured into the area if

he knew that it was an industrial site. He blamed the steel companies for flouting environmental laws.

"This area was a fallow land when I built my house 10 years ago. I passed through a thick bush before I got here. We never knew this was an industrial area; otherwise, we would have stayed away. But having said that, I can only say this habit of emitting smoke day and night is an act of wickedness.

"It is hellish when they start operation and all their pots are working. The smoke will blacken the air and the day turns into night. This is not an exaggeration. It is sheer wickedness. These companies allow the smoke to go through their chimneys once in a while. But they allow the smoke to spread over the community a lot of the times," he says.

While Odonla is not the only place bearing the brunt of the toxic emissions, findings showed that development associations from some of the host communities have, at various times, engaged the companies on the way forward.

A former CDA Chairman in Oruku, who identified himself only as Alhaji Taofeek, said acid rains and respiratory tract infections were common in the community.

"No matter how well you dust your furniture, you will notice another coat of dust in five minutes. Our sputum is black every time we spit. We took some steps when I was the CDA chairman but there was no trust. We asked everybody to contribute money, but if you later bought a pin, they (residents) would say you spent their money," he explained.

The CDA Secretary, Mr. Samuel Ating, said many residents had health challenges as a result of the activities of the steel companies.

"My children have running noses all the time. Feverish conditions, breathing problems and red eyes are some of our health challenges. You feel acidity on your tongue when you wake up in the morning. It has even affected our farms because we experience poor yields. Our plantains are dying and no roof in this community lasts more than a year. You just have to change it," he said.

Industrial pollution compounding global warming

A temperature data recently released by the Japan Meteorological Association showed that 2014 is officially the hottest year on record. The report, which has since been validated by the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration as well as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, United Kingdom, rated 2014 as the warmest year since records were first kept in 1891.

Quote of the day

"Senator Saraki directly or indirectly and the clerk of the National Assembly were reached directly or indirectly and they would have shown that respect to Mr. President, but the process went ahead. And that is it. The clerk and Senator Saraki, the key characters in all of these, had sufficient information directly or indirectly coming to them that the President would be meeting the party members. The assumption would have been that every loyal and committed party member would have presented themselves to the party and to their President. That did not happen on Tuesday."

The SSA to President Muhammadu Buhari on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, saying Saraki and Maikasuwa were aware of the meeting Buhari and the leadership of the All Progressives Congress had with the APC senators before the Senate was inaugurated.

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According to the report, the average temperature, across all land and ocean surfaces, was up by 1.24 degrees Fahrenheit.

The report also ranked 1998 as the second hottest year on record while 2013 and 2010 tied in the third place.

Studies have also indicated that human and industrial pollution are the biggest driver of global warming.

A 2013 study by a team of researchers from the National Metallurgical Development Centre, University of Jos and the University of Uyo, has identified carbon monoxide “as the single largest pollutant in the urban atmosphere.”

The gas, which is a byproduct of vehicular and industrial emissions, is said to have a special attraction for haemoglobin in the blood stream.

“Limited exposure to small amounts of CO causes headache, dizziness and general discomfort. Continuous exposure to this gas (above 50ppm) can result in death within minutes to one hour.”

According to the World Steel Association, 1.8 tonnes of carbon monoxide are emitted or every tonne of steel produced. Also, the International Energy Agency, in 2010, submitted that iron and steel industry account or 6.7 per cent of total carbon monoxide emissions in the world.

An endangered specie

For the workers, industry watchers said the danger lay beyond falling cranes and flying particles. During operation, furnaces heat up to unbearable levels and workers work an average of three hours daily in a typical steel rolling firm in Nigeria. But Igwe said workers should not be exposed to the furnace for more than one hour per shift – because of heat.

The General Secretary, Footwear, Leather and Rubber Products Senior Staff Association, Mr. John Fagite, said rather than emitting toxic gases into the air, the companies could direct their emissions underground to minimise health risks to workers and the environment.

Agite added that though a causal worker who is paid daily cannot sue his or her employers, labour leaders “adopt various ways to fight for the interest of members. Producing steel constantly emitting smokes into the air day and night jeopardises the health of other company’s workers including visitors as well as their own employee in the environment,” he said.

Speaking to our correspondent on Thursday, the Director of Factories, Ministry of Labour and Productivity, Mrs. Nofisat Arogundade, said relatives of deceased workers in the steel companies were entitled to compensation. She added that that Phoenix Steel Limited, Ogijo, which was shut last year, was reopened after the company satisfied the requirements of the ministry.

“We reopened the factory because its management complied with our directives. That is the only industrial accident I know. But I am sure the relatives are entitled to compensation under the Employee Compensation Act of 2010. They are supposed to pay the relatives. It does not matter whether they were casual workers or not. They lost their lives in the premises of the company,” she said.

Though he was quick to score the steel industries in Lagos high, the General Manager, Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency, Engineer Rasheed Shabi, admitted that only a few of the firms has an environmental policy, a concretised scrapyard and a health, safety and environment officer who ensures that safety chain is not breached. He also said the firms were lacking in enforcing the usage of the PPE among the workers.

Shabi added that he had had to shut down some firms and sanction others for the aberrations.

He said, “It is true that steel industries contribute to the pollution load in the environment. But we have been able to reduce it to about 35 per cent in the last 13 months. I am happy that I am getting results from the steel industries because there is nowhere in the world where you can get 100 per cent abatement (emission reduction). If you had visited two years ago, it was messier.

“I visited a company along Amuwo-Odofin area and the work condition was terrible. The temperature was very high and workers were not wearing PPE. I had to shut down the company.”

Attempts to speak with officials of the Metal Africa Steel Company, and Reel Steel Company were not successful last week. But, speaking in defence of his company, the Personnel Manager, Top Steel Company, who simply identified himself as Mr. Falade, said a new technology to combat the emissions had been acquired. Admitting that there had been complaints from community members, he absolved his firm of any blame, saying that it was an environmental-friendly organisation.


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"We are a responsible company and we acquired a new technology to take care of the emissions. We are not even producing at the moment due to some factors. But we carry out internal and external fumigation using government accredited agencies. No worker has died here but you know that the condition of service is different for day workers. It is true that there have been complaints but we have improved on our operations," he said.

Similarly, the Personnel Manager, African Steel Company, Mr. Makinde, said his organisation did not have a record of casualties.

"There is nothing hidden because LASEPA regulates and monitors us. You can come and speak to my superiors next week but we comply with the law. We are doing everything within our capacity to reduce the emissions," he said

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