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In Ago Iwoye, mourning is still the word

JULY 2, 2015 : FOLASHADE ADEBAYO ■ 5 COMMENTS

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The death of 12 students of the Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State, in a road accident on Friday, is still a bitter pill to swallow for the monarch of the town, Oba Abdulrasak Adenugba, the people and the university, FOLASHADE ADEBAYO writes

Life at No. 8, Oshiyokun Lane, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State, was never the same since Omolade Ogunnoiki, a 100 Level History student of the Olabisi Onabanjo University, moved into the boys' quarters last year.

Tenants said the lively teenager, and three other friends who lived with her, were hard to miss in a crowd. Ogunnoiki was the chatterbox, while one of the other girls, Funmilayo Pampam, could do the laundry all day. The girls also stamped their presence on the wall of their one-room apartment, writing their nicknames with colourful ink.

Ogunnoiki was 'Ebony,' while Zainab styled herself 'the First Lady.' Pampam, on her part, preferred to be called 'Portable,' just as Adedayo, the fourth girl, chose 'Sexy' as her appellation. Far beyond the building, the feisty friends were known as the 'Famous Four.'

However, the bond the girls shared was permanently broken on Friday. Ogunnoiki and Pampam were two of the victims of a auto accident involving a truck carrying an unlatched container and a passenger bus on the Ilishan- Sagamu-Expressway.

The casualty figure also included Olatunji Dairo, a 2014 Physics graduate of the OOU, among 11 other undergraduates and the driver.

In a bid to avoid bad portions on the road, the driver of the truck was reportedly driving against the traffic when the container fell off its hinges, crushing to death the two friends and nine other OOU students travelling to Lagos. At the time of their demise, Ogunnoiki and Pampam were 17 and 18 years old respectively.

As expected, the shocking death of 12 students of the OOU has thrown the academic community and, indeed, the larger Ago Iwoye town, into mourning. When our correspondent visited there on Tuesday, a noticeable grief enveloped the university town interspersed with tall trees and vast green mangrove.

Describing the incident as 'murder,' the Public Relations Officer, Student Union Government, Damilola Adelesi, said the students would stop at nothing to ensure the arrest of the truck driver and the compensation to the families of the victims.

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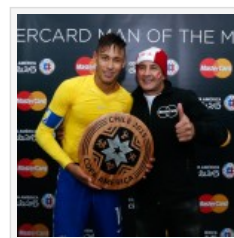


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"We believe that our colleagues were intentionally murdered. It is very unreasonable to leave your lane when your container is not belted. These victims were young people. We have written a letter to the state government and the Federal Road Safety Commission and we expect them to take action.

"Unlatched trucks have continued to ply the road since the accident and nobody has questioned them. We have given the authorities a seven-day ultimatum," Adelesi said.

While an air of grief pervaded the entire town, the tragedy also had a personal twist. To Abiodun Adebayo, Pampam's boyfriend, the incident remains a bad dream from which he wishes he could wake up. The young man who described the late girl as bold and brilliant, desperately wished he had done something to stop the trip.

"I saw her that morning from afar, but we did not talk because we had a disagreement some days earlier. She left for the Lagos park with her friends, but only she and Omolade (Ogunnoki) boarded the same bus. The other two boarded the Oshodi bus.

"In the evening, I tried her line, but it was not going through. I started suspecting a problem when Omolade's line was also not going through. It was when I called Zainab that I got to know of the accident. It is still like a dream to me.

"Funmi was gentle, brilliant and outspoken. You could not but like her. She always told me that she wanted to work in the medical sector. It is very unfortunate that she had to die like that. She was the only girl in her family and the only individual that had attended a university. Her brothers and parents are always sending money for her upkeep," he said.

Aside from Adebayo, Omolade's maternal grandmother is still in shock. The elderly woman who took over the care of the late young lady from birth reached her breaking point when our correspondent called her line on Tuesday.

Almost dumbfounded at the circumstances that claimed the life of her granddaughter, the elderly Ogunnoki could barely contain her anger.

"I don't have anything to say. The government should answer the questions. They know what to do and they have refused to do it. But they should not forget that what goes round comes around," she said.

'I have never seen anything like that'

Uneasy calm hung over the Lagos Park of the National Union of Road Transport Employees, Ago Iwoye, on Tuesday. Passengers, who were mostly students, quietly boarded available buses heading to different destinations.

The ill-fated bus had left the park, full of students before 10a.m. last Friday after an initial trip from Sango, Ogun State, to the town that morning. But, beyond the fact that it was a 'Sango bus,' nobody seemed to know the name of the late driver or his vehicle's number plate.

An official of the NURTW at the park, Mr. Kazeem Onabegun, simply said the bus was painted white and had '331' as part of its number. The transport worker, who claimed to have been in the business for 15 years, however, debunked reports that it was the unhinged container that sealed the victims' fate.

"The incident is still a great shock to us and only God and the lone survivor can explain what actually happened. I have never seen anything like that since I started this business 15 years ago. We could not find the seats in the bus when we got to the accident scene.

"Even the container itself was not on the bus; the entire body of the bus was rolled away. I think it was the tray on which the container sat that sliced the bus into two," he said.

Also speaking in a telephone interview with our correspondent, the Chairman of the Ago Iwoye Unit of the NURTW, Mr. Funmilayo Odugbose, said the driver of the passenger bus could not have been under the influence of any narcotics or alcoholic beverage.

"That day was a sad one for us at the park and we rushed to the scene of the accident when we heard the news. If you look around our park, you will see that nobody is allowed to sell *paraga* (an alcoholic beverage). It is not allowed. We are already working with the police on the matter and we pray that such an incident will never occur again," he said.

While not disregarding the terrible state of the Sagamu-Benin expressway, Adelesi also indicted Sellplast, a plastic industry; as well as the Police and FRSC officials who were at the scene of the incident.

"We found it ridiculous that our colleagues were taken to a maternity hospital when the Ogun State Teaching Hospital is nearer. We thought there was monetary collaboration between the Police and the private hospital.



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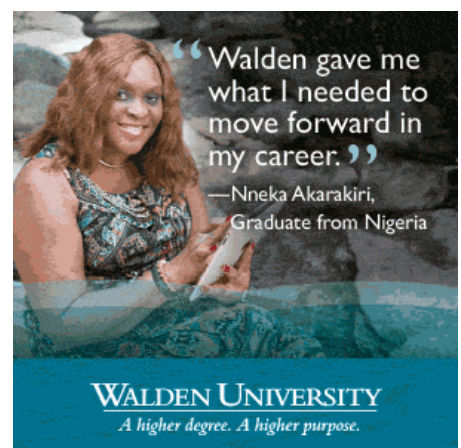


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The name of the hospital is actually Fakoya Maternity Hospital and not what was reported in the media. But we were confused when we saw a mortuary behind the hospital.

"It was really bizarre because a doctor said we had to pay N35,000 per corpse before they could be evacuated. Unknown to us, the parents were already negotiating to pay N10,000 per corpse until we intervened and insisted no money would be paid.

"We are insisting on justice for our late colleagues. We opened the truck and discovered chemicals traceable to Sellplast. We have gone to the company and we are insisting that they produce the truck driver and pay compensation to the families," the SUG spokesperson said.

Famished roads

But the tragic incident which claimed the lives of 13 promising young Nigerians is only a snippet of road accident statistics occasioned by bad, famished roads in the country. Aside from fatalities recorded from the Boko Haram insurgents, the World Health Organisation indicated that casualties from road accidents were the major cause of violent deaths in Nigeria. A report by the international agency also indicated that one in every road accident in Africa occurred in Nigeria.

A 2011 Road Safety Survey by the United Nations ranked Nigeria as the second worst country in the world in a list of 193 countries. Another research by the International Road Federation, Geneva Programme Centre, revealed that 3,000 people die daily in road accidents across the world. Africa is said to be the worst hit, as the bulk of the victims live in the region.

Furthermore, an eight-year study on road accidents by the French Institute for Research in Africa showed that 15,090 lives were lost in 3,075 accidents.

The study, which covered 2006- 2014 and entitled, 'Trends and patterns of fatal road accidents in Nigeria,' was done by Vitus Ukoji, a research fellow with the institute.

In 2011, the FRSC released a list of accident-prone roads in the country to include Katsina-Kano Road; Kabba Omuo-Ekiti Road; Akwanga-Lafia highway and Owerri-Aba-Port Harcourt Road. Others include Jos-Bauchi-Gombe Road; Oye Ifaki-Ekiti Road and Onitsha-Enugu Road, among others.

Before reconstruction and repair works eventually started on it last year, many Nigerians had died in ghastly accidents on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway.

Experts have put causes of road accidents down to three factors: human error, mechanical and environmental factors. And, according to the WHO, poor road conditions, which fall under environmental factor, can be linked to a host of errors that include faulty designs, multiple bends, as well as lack of maintenance.

But while cases of road accidents may not be totally eradicated, experts argue that incidents linked to bad roads should not be in the picture for the largest economy in Africa.

Admitting that bad roads contribute to the spate of accidents in the country, the Sector Commander, FRSC Lagos, Mr. Hyginus Omeje, said that human factor had, by far, been the most significant contribution to road accidents. In a telephone interview with this correspondent on Wednesday, Omeje said the accident involving the OOU students was due to human error.

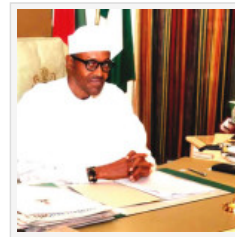
"I understand that one of the drivers in the Ago-Iwoye incident was driving against the traffic. That a lane is bad does not mean you should switch to the other lane indiscriminately. Even if you have to switch to another lane as a result of the poor condition of the first, your driving should change because you are now borrowing a lane. It means you should be more careful because that is not the time to start engaging in some dangerous overtaking moves," he said.

The FRSC boss also rapped truck drivers who use belts to secure containers. While saying that his men had rights to enforce the law requiring trucks to belt the containers, he said experience had shown that bad roads could open the locks.

"The FRSC has always enforced this issue of unlatched containers. We know this has caused a lot of crashes, especially within Lagos. The moment you put a container on the flatbed, you are supposed to lock it. It has a lock. We don't expect to see belts around the container.

"But each time we investigate issues like these, the drivers claim that they locked it and that the lock opened as they moved through a gallop or bad portion of the road. We also know that if a container was locked and it crashes, both the container and the vehicle will fall down, as against if it was not locked. In such cases, only the container will fall," Omeje said.

He added, "We are all witnesses to the rehabilitation works being done by the Federal Government on our highways. We have had remarkable improvement in recent times. We are hoping that the good works the



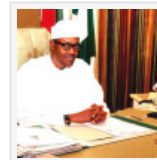
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Quote of the day.

"I personally hold Chief Akande in high esteem but what he wrote in that letter was nothing short of an insult on our collective sensibilities. How can you single out a section of your party and call them criminals who were supporting rebels to destroy the party we all built? This is most unexpected and uncharitable to say the least."

An APC leader from the North, saying Chief Akande's comments about oil barons behind Saraki and Dogara's emergence as Senate President and Speaker, were unnecessary and an insult on their collective sensibilities.

Federal Government is doing would continue so that the percentage of deaths attributable to bad roads can reduce remarkably.

"However, let me say that the most important factor in road crashes is the human element. If the road is bad and the driver understands that the road is bad, then he should slow down and obey traffic rules. That is what is lacking."

Meanwhile, just as the remains of the students were buried on Monday, the Ebumawe of Ago Iwoye, Oba Abdulrazaq Adenugba, has called on relevant authorities to be alive to their duties. The traditional ruler, who expressed regrets at the development, said all stakeholders must do their bit if such accidents would be averted in the future.

"Ago Iwoye has not been the same since the unfortunate incident. Aside from being in my care, the students drive the economy of this town. But you see that many shops are locked. Many of the students live within the town and have been adopted as sons and daughters by their landlords.

"The truck must have left a place where all the necessary checks were not done. The Federal Road Safety Commission sees these unbelted trucks every day, but does not arrest them. Though I am not holding brief for the truck driver, we learnt that he was trying to avoid the potholes when he decided to face the oncoming traffic.

"The outcome would have been different had the Federal Road Maintenance Agency done its job," the monarch said.

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