

# Tears as minister, Ocholi, wife, son die in auto crash

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*The SUV after the crash on the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway ...on Sunday. Photo: Olatunji Obasa and Godwin Isenyo (inset: )Minister of State for Labour and Productivity, Mr. James Ocholi (SAN)*

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The Minister of State for Labour and Productivity, Mr. James Ocholi (SAN); his wife, Blessing; and son, Joshua, on Sunday died in a road crash along the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway, 57 kilometres to their Kaduna destination.

It was learnt that the Sport Utility Vehicle in which the family travelled in, had a burst tyre on the highway, leading to the crash.

Ocholi, who hailed from Ogbabede-Abocho in the Dekina Local Government Area of Kogi State, and his

third child were said to have died on the spot after the Prado-Jeep had a burst tyre in the rear and somersaulted several times.

It was gathered that the minister's SUV ran into other vehicles in his convoy.

A critically injured Blessing died at the Doka Government Hospital, Kaduna, around 4pm on Sunday.

The driver and aide de camp, who were also rushed to the clinic, were later brought to the National Hospital, Abuja at 7.45pm for treatment.

The Kaduna State Sector Commander of the Federal Road Safety Commission, Mr. Francis Udoma, said the accident occurred about 57 kilometres away from Kaduna.

Udoma confirmed that the minister and the son died on the spot, adding that some aides to the late minister also sustained injuries.

The news of the minister's death was first broken by his counterpart for Aviation, Hadi Sirika.

He said on his twitter handle, "It is too heavy for me to bear the loss of my dear friend, Minister of State, James Ochoi, SAN. We departed on Friday to meet no more."

The Head, Media Relations and Strategy, FRSC, Bisi Kazeem, also confirmed the sad incident.

He said, "There was a road traffic crash along Abuja-Kaduna Expressway involving an SUV which somersaulted after one of its tyres burst. Sadly, the Minister of State for Labour, James Ochoi, lost his life in the crash."

Tears flowed uncontrollably among friends, lawyers, chieftains of the All Progressives Congress and relatives as the corpses of Ochoi, Blessing and Joshua were brought to the National Hospital, Abuja, by officials of the FRSC.

That of his wife was brought in about one hour, thirty minutes later.

Senior government officials, who were on the ground at the Hospital when the vehicles arrived, were seen discussing the incident in hushed tones.

Two FRSC vehicles, an ambulance with number plate A01 0637RS, and an escort pick-up van, marked A01 736RS, brought the corpses to the hospital.

Scores of sympathisers wailed uncontrollably as the bodies of the deceased were being removed from the ambulance.

President Muhammadu Buhari expressed shock and sadness at the death of Ocholi, his wife and son.

In a statement by his Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, on Sunday, Buhari described the death of the minister's as untimely, regretting that Nigeria had lost a key component of the change agenda.

"Barrister Ocholi was an accomplished and patriotic Nigerian, who was keen to accept the call to service at a time his country needed him," Buhari said.

He added that in the few months he had been in office, the late minister of state had already begun to distinguish himself through his commitment and dedication to his portfolio.

The late Ocholi had a long record of political association with Buhari.

Buhari also condoled with the government and people of Kogi State, which he described as having lost a distinguished and irreplaceable son.

He prayed that God would comfort them and grant them the grace to bear the loss.

"The entire country mourns the loss of this great man, who has sadly left us when we need him most," he said.

Buhari also sent the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Mr. David Babachir, to formally convey the news to members of the deceased family as well as parishioners in his place of worship.

Speaking with journalists at the National Hospital premises, Babachir stated that the three family members were killed in the crash at about 3pm.

He said, "I will like to confirm that at about 3pm today (Sunday), the Minister of State for Labour, James

Ocholi (SAN), was involved in a motor accident along the Kaduna-Abuja road. In this accident, the minister lost his life, his son also lost his life, and the wife also lost her life.

“It is a very sad day indeed for Nigeria as this has never happened and President Muhammadu Buhari is in shock; all members of the Federal Executive Council are in shock and indeed all Nigerians are in shock.

“The President wants us to extend his condolence to Nigerians, the people of Kogi State and the immediate family of James Ocholi.

“Personally, I have known Ocholi for more than 20 years; we have been friends, both in politics and in Christian service. I am indeed personally saddened by this and cannot begin to express the grief that we all face.

“Now the bodies have been recovered and deposited in the mortuary and we are waiting for the immediate family and the government for the next line of action. May God comfort all of us Nigerians”.

Other dignitaries, who were at the National Hospital to receive the corpses of the Ocholis included the Minister of Labour, Dr. Chris Ngige; Minister of Health, Prof. Isaac Adewole; Minister of State for Health, Dr. Osagie Ehanire; Chief Medical Director of National Hospital, and Dr. Jafaru Momoh.

Others are Minister of Power, Works and Housing, Babatunde Fashola (SAN); Minister of Environment, Aisha Mohammed; legal practitioner, Festus Keyamo; and Commissioner of Police in the FCT, Wilson Inalegwu.

The National Secretariat of the APC, in a statement on Sunday, expressed shock over the news of the death of Ocholi, his wife and son.

The National Secretary of the party, Mai Mala Buni, in a condolence message on behalf of the party in Abuja, described the deaths as “a monumental loss.”

Buni said the late Ocholi, who, until his appointment as minister, served as the party’s Deputy National Legal Adviser, would be remembered for his selfless service to the legal profession, the party, his home state of Kogi and Nigeria as a whole.

He prayed for the recovery of other occupants of the vehicle involved in the accident.

The Nigerian Bar Association on Sunday expressed shock over the death of Ocholi.

Speaking through its President, Mr. Augustine Alegeh (SAN), the NBA described Ocholi's death as unbelievable and a painful loss to the association.

He described the deceased as a perfect gentleman and "a consummate bar man", who had contributed immensely to the development of the NBA.

Alegeh added, "It is sad and shocking news. It is unbelievable. James was a perfect gentleman, a devout Christian, a consummate bar man. He contributed immensely to the development of the bar.

"This is a very sad and painful loss to the entire bar."

Ngige described the death of his junior minister as a shock, which he could not express in words.

Ngige said with the death of the minister, the country had lost an industrial servant and an invaluable intellectual, noting that Ocholi's death only showed the emptiness of life.

Ngige's comments were contained in a statement by his Special Assistant on Media, Mr. Nwachukwu Ngige, on the death of the minister of state.

He stated, "Rudely shocking but it is true! The Minister of State for Labour and Employment, Chief James Ocholi (SAN), is dead. Am short of words, overwhelmed by shock!

"An industrious servant of our dear nation is gone. In him, the Ministry of labour and Employment lost such an invaluable intellectual.

"Personally, I lost a competent colleague and a friend. What a vanity this life is! What an emptiness! What a nothingness we are!

"I pray that God Almighty, Himself, the author of all creations, would give eternal rest to Ocholi, his wife and son. What a sad day!"

The Kogi State Governor, Alhaji Yahaya Bello, said he was devastated at the death of Ocholi.

Bello described the late Ocholi as a pragmatic, dynamic, humane and brilliant law officer, who was known around the world for his dexterous approach to legal and political issues and as one of the most unswerving constitutional lawyers Nigeria had ever produced.

The governor recollected with nostalgia, how the late SAN joined other progressive-minded individuals around the country to drive the intellectual pillars of the APC.

He described the late minister as a detribalised Nigerian, who believed in the oneness of the nation, summing up his death as an irreparable loss to Kogi State, Nigeria, the APC and the legal profession.

In its reaction, Governor Nasir el-Rufai of Kaduna State stated that he was in deep shock over the death of the minister, son and wife.

The governor, through his Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Samuel Aruwan, described the incident as “devastating” and condoled with Buhari, the people of Kogi State as well as the family of the late minister.

The Minister of State for Environment, Ibrahim Jibril, described Ocholi’s death as a great loss.

In a series of tweets on his official Twitter handle on Sunday, Jibril described the late minister as a very good team player.

He said the present cabinet would miss him.

Jibril said, “James (Ocholi) was such a lovely person and a very good team player. We shall surely miss his contribution in the cabinet. Join us in praying for him. A very sad day indeed! The wife has also just passed on. Join us in praying for the souls of the departed please. Rest in peace, James.”

A SAN, Mr. Sebastian Hon, who said Ocholi was his personal friend, described the minister’s death as “most shocking”.

Hon said, “It is simply unbelievable that my good friend, James Ocholi (SAN), is dead. This is most tragic. This is the most shocking. Death, where is your victory?”

Another SAN, Mr. Jibrin Okutepe, who described Ocholi as his friend and brother, said he had been involved in doing many cases together with the deceased.

“The news is not only shocking, it is also devastating,” Okutepe said, while reacting to the news of Ocholi’s death on Sunday.

Lagos lawyer, Festus Keyamo, also mourned the death of the ministers on his official Twitter handle on Sunday.

He said, “I am short of words. I just spoke with Dino (Melaye); he confirmed the body of my colleague and friend, James Ocholi, (SAN) is on its way to the National Hospital, Abuja.”

Also, the Kogi State Chairman of Nigeria Labour Congress, Comrade Onu Edoke, said the passing away of the minister was shocking.

Edoka added that he thought he was dreaming when he heard the news until it was confirmed by people close to the late minister.

He believed the state would miss the services of the late Ocholi, adding that his exit was a painful one to the people of the state.

Ocholi was born on November 26, 1960 and hailed from the Dekina LGA of Kogi State.

He studied Law at the University of Jos and was called to the bar in 1986.

Ocholi was a Public Counsel in the firm of D.D Peter Achimusi in Idah, Kogi State, and thereafter left for private practice.

In December 2007, he was conferred with the prestigious title of SAN.

Ocholi specialised in incorporation of companies; constitutional and commercial law and conveyance as well as private and public international law.

He worked as consultants to governments, parastatals, banks and other corporate bodies.

He was the Deputy National Legal Adviser (interim) of the APC and later became the Kogi State Coordinator of the Buhari/Osinbajo Presidential Campaign Organisation.

He was appointed a minister in September, 2015.

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