

Gov escapes death as 200 die in Akwa Ibom church collapse

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The Reigners Bible Church International Incorporation, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, after it collapsed... on Saturday. Photos: Etim Ekpimah

Etim Ekpimah

The Governor of Akwa Ibom State, Mr. Udom Emmanuel, narrowly escaped death on Saturday as the building of Reigners' Bible Church Int'l Inc, along Uyo Village Road, Uyo, the state capital, collapsed during service.

The incident left about 200 worshippers dead. Sources said it took the efforts of the governor's security officers to whisk him away to safety. He was said to have sustained a minor injury.

SUNDAY PUNCH learnt that the governor was in the church attending the ordination of the church's Presiding Pastor, Bishop Elect Akan Weeks, when the building gave way few minutes before offering period.

One of the aides, who rescued the governor, was said to have died at a nearby hospital where he was rushed to.

A security officer, who did not want to be named, said many dignitaries who accompanied the governor to the church also died.

Our correspondent gathered that the Secretary to the State Government, Mr. Etekamba Umoren, also shattered his head in the incident. He was said to have been taken to an undisclosed hospital in the state.

SUNDAY PUNCH learnt that the Chief Press Secretary to the Governor, Ekerette Udoh, also sustained serious injury.

It was gathered that construction works on a section where the ordination held were rushed because of Saturday's event. The church has an estimated 10,000-seater capacity. Two cranes belonging to construction giant, Julius Berger, were used to clear the debris.

A clash was averted between the police and some residents as the latter tried to calm frayed nerves.

The state Commissioner for Works, Ephraim Inyang, refused to speak with journalists when he was approached. He ordered them to leave the place.

Mrs. Yenime Ekpo, who is a mother to one of the victims, Tony Brown, 46 with six children, said they were worshipping in the church when the building collapsed.

She stated that Brown was trapped in the rubble for many hours along with others before she was rescued.

Saying she was unsure of her son's survival, Ekpo noted that they were not members of the church but only went to witness the ordination.

Also, a student of the University of Uyo, Department of Communication Arts, Uduak Effiong, said she lost three of her course mates to the incident.

She stated that when the building collapsed, a pillar fell upon a woman and tore her body.

She said, "I saw over 100 dead bodies. These were the ones close to me. From my estimation, more than 300 people might have died as people came from other churches in all parts of the state, including government-sponsored praised singers with uniforms to attend the programme. For some of us that escaped, we only did by the special grace of God."

Another student of the University of Uyo, Jennifer Thomas, told our correspondent that one of her friends, Blessing Linus, was trapped in the debris.

It was learnt that the iron used in holding the roofing sheet was twice heavier than the block used for the building. Security operatives cordoned the area and denied journalists access.

Some members of the church seized the identity card of our correspondent and his computer tablet, saying he was a traitor as he tried to take pictures.

The state Commissioner of Police, Mr. Murtala Mani, who said he could not ascertain the number of those dead or those trapped in the building, expressed sadness over the development.

He said, "I am sorry about the entire situation."

The Chief Medical Director of the University of Uyo Teaching Hospital, Prof. Etete Peters, said of the 50 cases treated in the treatment, only one person died.

He said about 200 persons were brought to the hospital dead, adding that the hospital had never prepared for such an emergency.

He said, "We only lost one person in the hospital except those that were brought dead. In circumstances like this, we have been overwhelmed. We need help from government.

"Many victims are in private hospitals and mortuaries scattered all over Uyo metropolis; we can't really tell how many people have died so far. We have over 200 persons in the mortuaries. We do not have space as people are still being brought in."

"We have done our best to revive some victims. Right now, we have over 50 cases we are attending to. This is the first time we are witnessing such an incident."

At St. Athanasius Hospital Limited, a nurse told our correspondent that one person was brought to the hospital dead but the relatives were asked to take the corpse away.

In its reaction, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria said it shared in the pain of the leadership and members of the church.

In a statement by its state Chairman, Dr. Sylvanus Ukafia, the association urged all Pentecostal churches in the state and in Nigeria to hold special prayers for the church on Sunday (today).

It added, "All churches should take special offerings for the medical assistance of all those injured and send same to the Reigners' Bible Church. Church members who can are also urged to donate blood, where necessary, to those in the hospital and make other donations as may be required in the course of the treatment of those injured."

In its reaction, the state government said a panel of enquiry would be constituted to ascertain the immediate and remote factors leading to the collapse of the church building with a view to forestall a reoccurrence.

A statement by the Chief Press Secretary also noted that persons found to have compromised professional standards in the construction of the building would be sanctioned.

It added, "His Excellency, the Governor of Akwa Ibom State, Mr. Udom Emmanuel, was present at the church service during the incident and thereafter personally supervised rescue operations and evacuation of the injured to the hospital. The state government will undertake the medical treatment of the victims."

Meanwhile, President Muhammadu Buhari on Saturday congratulated Emmanuel, and his family on their lucky escape from the collapse of the building of the Reigners Bible Church, Uyo.

The President through a statement by his Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, also conveyed to the governor and the people of the state, the deep sorrow of his family, the government and the entire people of Nigeria over the many deaths and injury recorded following the incident.

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