

Bonny: Oil-rich island where moving in and out can claim your life

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Blessed with an abundant reserve of natural gas and a water body replete with some of nature's finest gifts, moving in and out of Bonny island, Rivers State, has become a journey of death for many of the area's residents, writes Eric Dumo

Only few places on earth today can boast of the wealth Bonny possesses. A sprawling island tucked in the heart of Rivers State, the community is home to some of the world's most sought-after resources. Oil, gas, chemicals – the area has them all in spilling quantity. It is not only the pride of the state but also among Nigeria's 'golden geese', whose 'eggs' feed most parts of the country. The Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas has made the place home since 1970, prospecting, refining and exporting all manners of gaseous products to other parts of the world from the island.

But despite its significant contribution to the national economy, most residents of Bonny have only little to show for the wealth their community is blessed with. Even though the town enjoys uninterrupted electricity supply – courtesy of the presence of NLNG in the area – the non-existence

of other basic amenities like potable water, has ensured that the good life continues to elude most households and individuals on the island.

While the people of this town have found ways to surmount some of these challenges, it will take a long time, however, before they can overcome the evil they now contend with on Bonny's vast waterway. Lacking a link road connecting it to other parts of the state, residents and visitors to the island are forced to rely on boats – most of them in rickety conditions – to get to their destinations. Apart from contending with the fury of the sea on such trips, the presence of ruthless and 'blood sucking' pirates along its water channel has made going in and out of Bonny now a journey of death for many living in the area.

During a visit to the community recently, our correspondent saw first-hand, how residents of the island risked their lives every day to connect to other parts of Rivers State especially Port Harcourt, the capital. Usually a journey lasting around 45 minutes depending on the size and condition of the boat's engine, many individuals and families have had horrible experiences in the course of taking such rides. While dozens have lost their lives in the process after encountering storms or sea pirates in recent months, those lucky to be alive, live with the horror and memories of their close shaves with death.

Veronica Lucky, 32, falls in that category. On the morning of April 6, 2017 while travelling in a boat from Bonny to Port Harcourt for her grandmother's burial at Akwa Ibom State, things took a different turn for her. Midway into their journey, a fiery storm hit the sea, changing the atmosphere and leaving their boat at the mercy of surging waves. In a matter of minutes, the vessel was flung into the water. By the time the fury of the storm simmered, all three of her children had drowned and washed away. Two years after their death, the wound remains as fresh as ever.

"That fateful morning, I prepared myself and the children for a trip to Akwa Ibom State where my grandmother was to be buried," she began. "The eldest child named Rejoice was nine at the time, the second, Glory, was seven while the last named Victory was six months old then.

"The weather was calm when we got to the jetty in Bonny that morning but after we boarded the boat and proceeded on the journey, we suddenly encountered storm on the sea, everywhere became dark all of a sudden.

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“We advised the driver of the boat to steer it closer to the mangrove but he did not listen to us. He reluctantly told us that nothing was going to happen. He asked some of the passengers to move to the front of the boat so that it could gain some balance.

“Everybody was in panic and suddenly heavy wave hit our boat and it capsized. From there, the struggle to survive began.

“At the end of the day, my three children and some other passengers all lost their lives,” she said while recalling the tragic incident when our correspondent visited her home on the island.

Stranded in the sea for over two hours after that incident, the 32-year-old woman hovered between life and death as a heavy downpour descended on the vast waterway. As a result, the water levels rose astronomically, exposing her and the other survivors to grave danger. Lucky was at the mercy of the elements.

“Till this moment, I cannot explain how I managed to survive that accident,” the Akwa Ibom native, who now has a little baby, said. “Even though I was between life and death, I never allowed fear overtake me. I still believed strongly that I was going to make it out alive from the sea.

“I remember throwing myself inside the sea each time a wave approached and later coming out when it had passed. This happened several times until help came.

“The accident happened at about 7:00am that day but those of us who survived were rescued at about 11:00am. It was raining heavily at the time, making rescue very difficult,” she added.

Finally rescued by local fisherman at a nearby settlement, Lucky told *Saturday PUNCH* that the loss of her three children in that tragedy has changed her life forever. According to her, even though she now has another child after that incident, the death of the three in the accident would be hard for her to forget.

“The loss of my three children is something I don’t think I can ever get over,” she said as tears trickled down her cheeks. “They were lovely and brilliant but the tragedy took them away.

“The incident has changed my life in many ways. Apart from losing my business, I also lost many other things that words can’t even describe.

“In fact, a lot of our relations have advised me and my husband to move out of the island because of the danger associated with moving in and out of the place.

“Since that incident, I have been too scared to pass through the sea again as a result of that terrible experience.

“I am sure that if there was a road connecting Bonny to other parts of Rivers, this type of sad incident wouldn’t have happened,” she added, clutching on tightly to a photograph of the children she lost. It was a moving sight – the type capable of melting even a heart made of steel.

Anthony Pepple, a 37-year-old boat driver, is another victim of the monster that now prowls the massive water separating Bonny from mainland Rivers State. A veteran in the business of ferrying passengers along the water channel, his career came to an abrupt end in February 2014 when he ran into the hands of pirates on the sea. Chased by the hoodlums for several minutes before being fired at, Pepple lost his left leg after a bullet from the pirates hit him there. Five years after that period, the pains and agony lingers.

“I was going to Bonny from Port Harcourt that fateful day when the attack took place,” the young man, whose left leg had since been amputated, said. “It was a few minutes before 6:00pm and suddenly the pirates came out from one of the creeks along the waterway and attacked us from behind.

“They chased us very fast and shot at me. The bullet pierced through two of my legs before going to kill a male passenger in the boat.

“The boat eventually capsized, we were 14 inside it and we were all struggling in the sea after the attack.

“After some time, we were rescued and I was rushed to Port Harcourt for medical care. One of my legs had to be amputated after the incident. I stayed almost two months in the hospital after the attack.

“After the amputation, the leg was given five years to fully heal but that time has elapsed and the pain is yet to go. It is as if somebody is using knife to slice my flesh,” he added.

Now without a job as a result of the loss of one of his legs, Pepple told *Saturday PUNCH* that survival had become very critical with most of what he gets from kind-hearted individuals going into buying drugs to suppress the pains he experiences.

“Surviving and taking care of myself has been very difficult after that attack by pirates,” he revealed. “I live on the benevolence of kind-hearted persons who sometimes gift me money.

“When I had two legs, I was able to work and earn a living but now nobody wants to give a man with only one leg a boat to operate.

“I cannot estimate the money I spend on taking care of my leg every month. Despite not working for now, I spend a huge amount of money on drugs and treatment every year.

“Even though I have travelled through that route after that incident but each time I get to the particular spot where the attack occurred, I remind myself of how I could have been a dead man by now,” he said.

Yet to fully get over the shock brought by the loss of her only sister, Joyce Jombo in July 2018 at the hands of sea robbers, Mrs. Hannah Wariboko has become a pale shadow of what she used to look like. Months of grieving over the loss had taken its toll on her, threatening her health in no small measure.

Returning to Bonny after attending a job interview that fateful July evening, Jombo had no inkling of the danger that laid in wait on this vast waterway as she boarded a boat at Creek Road waterside, Port Harcourt. It was a 20-seater boat fitted with a 75 horse power engine – a worthy machine to test the sea’s rage. After being filled to capacity, the journey began a few minutes after 5:00pm. Everything went well until they got to a section called Isaka along the way. A speeding boat from

one of the creeks carrying four heavily-armed young men wearing mask cornered their vessel. After robbing passengers of their belongings, the pirates went away with the engine of the boat in addition to three female occupants. Jombo was one of them. After three days without any word of their whereabouts, her terribly ravaged body found floating on water, told of the horror that had taken place. It was a big blow for Wariboko and the rest of the family.

“Joyce’s death still feels like a nightmare to me and the rest of the family,” the mother of five said when our correspondent visited her home in the Woji area of Port Harcourt. “She was a brilliant young lady full of life.

“She was returning to Bonny where she lived after attending a job interview in Port Harcourt that day when she and two other ladies were abducted by pirates.

“We did not hear any news until after three days when her body was found on water in one of the creeks.

“My sister didn’t deserve to die in such a cruel manner. If there was a road connecting Bonny to Port Harcourt, I am sure this type of thing wouldn’t have occurred.

“Each time I think about what happened to her, I am afraid taking the journey home to Bonny because there is no guarantee that one would safely arrive at his or her destination.

“We are still very pained about our loss, there is no word to describe the way we feel. It is a big blow for us to lose her in such a cruel manner,” she said before breaking down in tears.

Sad as it sounds, the cases of Lucky, Pepple and Jombo are only a fraction of the tragedy that has occurred along Bonny’s waterways in recent times.

In fact to highlight the enormity of the problem, our correspondent also had a taste of this deadly experience on the day he visited the island. Returning to Port Harcourt on the evening of February 20, 2019 after concluding findings in Bonny, the boat the reporter boarded a few minutes past 6:00pm ran into a gang of pirates around 6:40pm at the Isaka end of the sea. Cornered by the bandits and with no chance of an escape, all occupants of the boat including the driver, resigned to fate. Two of the five men, who were wearing masks, jumped into our boat. It was a moment that

filled the heart with thoughts of the end. After searching inside the boat and finding nothing attractive or enticing in it, the two gunmen looked furiously at our correspondent and another male passenger they suspected could be an oil worker. The two could be worthy captives to negotiate a handsome ransom, they must have thought in their heads. But while the guys were still thinking if to seize our phones and other personal items or to take the two of us away for more reward, their commander, a chubby and dark-complexioned man, called out to them to disembark from our vessel in a thick and dreadful voice that immediately sent a chill down the spine. In a matter of seconds, the gang sped off and cornered a smaller boat conveying household items and other consumable goods at the edge of the mangroove. And as our driver throttled away from the scene, the relief on the minds of all occupants could be felt with the palm. It was a walk through the valley of the shadow of death for our correspondent and the eight others in the vessel.

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But in recent times, others have not been that lucky after encountering danger on the vast waterway separating Bonny and Port Harcourt. Apart from several reported and unreported cases of boat mishaps in the region leading to loss of lives, attacks by pirates have compounded the misery of the people here.

For example, on November 19, 2018, three persons lost their lives when a boat they were travelling in capsized. The boat came up against the storm and high water current.

In April 2017, seven persons were killed when another boat capsized. Three years before then in August 2014, 15 people lost their lives while several remain missing when a boat heading to Port Harcourt from Bonny capsized.

While nature has played a role in some of these tragedies, it is the part contributed by humans that have worsened the problem the most. During the visit to the island, our correspondent observed how most of the boats ferrying passengers and goods in and out of Bonny were in terrible shape. Built locally with fibre material and fitted with an average engine capacity of 75 horse power, most of the commercial vessels have had their best years behind them. Many of them break down on the sea several times due to faulty engine and body no longer able to withstand the pressure of the wave. Most of the life vests seen by our correspondent at the take-off point in Port Harcourt and Bonny

were in terrible state and unable to properly protect passengers in case of emergency. While adult passengers can at least manage one of these in the course of making this trip, there are no life vests for children, leaving them the most vulnerable in case an accident occurs.

Also, the near non-existence of security patrol boats along the waterway has contributed in making the section a hotbed for pirates. Throughout the journey to Bonny island and back to Port Harcourt on the day our correspondent visited the area, only one gunboat by the Navy was seen on the water. Apart from being grossly inadequate considering the size and length of the water channel, it further exposes the danger those, who ply the route are made to contend with on a daily basis.

According to boat drivers and passengers, who travel the route frequently, patrol gunboats mostly escort vessels belonging to oil firms operating in the region while neglecting those travelling in commercial boats. During the visit, our correspondent confirmed this after seeing two gun boats with heavily-armed security personnel providing cover for a ferry belonging to one of the multinationals situated in Bonny. Even smaller boats carrying oil workers that arrived at the Bonny jetty while our correspondent was still moving around the place, had at least one gun boat escort that provided security for them. But for those travelling in commercial boats, it is a different story. For them, prayers and luck are their only armour.

“The police, navy or army don’t care about the safety of those in commercial boats,” Beach Master of Bonny jetty, Paul John-Jombo, told our correspondent. “The only time you see them on the water is when they are escorting boats belonging to oil firms and other multinationals. They hardly protect commercial boats and their passengers from pirate attacks,” he added.

Even though there is an umbrella body for boat operators in the region, safe practices and professionalism is far from being on the agenda of the association. During the visit, our correspondent saw how most of their boat drivers operated without caution and recourse to the safety of human lives. Stubborn and aggressive, they go by whatever they think is right regardless of its propriety.

“Most of the drivers operating the boats are unprofessional and stubborn,” Edward Baisoma, a social worker in the area told *Saturday PUNCH*. “When you try to advise them to do the right thing, they either ignore or fight you. They feel they know everything because they move around the way most of the time.

“There are no regulations and policies guiding them and this is part of the problem,” he said.

While the unprofessionalism of many of the boat drivers is a major factor contributing to the rising cases of tragedy on this water channel, the unwillingness of some of Bonny’s leaders to have modern and safer ferries replace the rickety boats dotting the landscape is another dimension to the problem, our correspondent discovered during the visit. Even though individual boat owners may not be able to afford the cost of a modern ferry, partnering with oil firms and other multinationals in the region, who have already shown interest in such collaborations, would have addressed the issue. The fear of losing their investments under this type of arrangement, is what has forced those in the business to maintain status quo, endangering lives in the process, *Saturday PUNCH* discovered.

“The biggest problem in Bonny transport system is the people,” Adibe Ekanga, one-time resident of the island said. “I remember in 2013 we staged a protest to the management of NLNG for them to provide modern ferries for the community after five of our colleagues died in two weeks.

“Instead of joining the agitation, we were resisted by the chiefs who own many of the commercial boats. I nearly lost my life in the process because I became a marked man for standing for what is right.

“Solving this problem is not difficult. If government and the oil firms operating in the area establish a framework that allows the boat operators to buy proper ferries under a partnership, what we see on the waterway to Bonny will be a thing of the past,” he added.

Worried by the situation, Commissioner for Transport in Rivers State, Akie Fubara, revealed that the state government has devised a new strategy to deal with the problem.

“We have concluded plans to retrain boat drivers,” he explained. “We have always cautioned drivers to read the weather before embarking on any journey.

“The Bonny waterway is not a mere sea, it is a high sea and when the weather is not clear, there is no reason why any boat driver should continue the journey.

“We have put all these into consideration and have decided to retrain boat drivers to enlighten them about certain tips on seafaring,” he added.

Conceived over 40 years ago, the 40 kilometre Bodo/Bonny road project in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers that is supposed to connect the oil-rich island to the rest of the state has remained more of a dream than reality. Standing at N20bn in 2002, the project was reviewed and jerked up to N120bn in 2014 by former President Goodluck Jonathan's administration with the NLNG committing to bear half of the cost. Drenched by constant calls to deliver the project, the Federal Government in December 2018 promised to complete it. Minister of Power, Works and Housing, Babatunde Fashola, disclosed that efforts were ongoing to ensure it is delivered on time.

“The road is a 40 kilometre project from Bodo to Bonny Island. In between it are three bridges – a 1000 metre bridge across the Opobo creek, a 640 metre bridge against the Nanabie Creek and a 550 metre bridge against the Afa Creek.

“This will ultimately connect all of the communities and hopefully in a time not too far away, we can drive to Bonny island from Bodo,” he said.

According to the Federal Controller of Works in Rivers State, Mr. Johnson Fadire, the issue of compensation for the host communities where the road passed through is among reasons for the delay of the project.

“Before you do anything in Bonny, you must demolish a lot of houses and that is why they need to be compensated because the farms that will be destroyed may be their only source of living.

“The people are very aggressive, when they want something, it is either you do it or you will not work, and this is affecting the progress of the work,” he said.

Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of NLNG, Tony Attah, believes that the completion of the project would ease the sufferings of the people of Bonny and environs.

“The success of this project, for all that it will cost the Federal Government and Nigeria LNG as co-financiers, will definitely be the highest and most remarkable accomplishment from a collaboration that is novel to our nation's infrastructural development.

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“Our greater joy is that the road will ease the plight of residents in Bonny island, the community that has hosted the Nigeria LNG Plant and other oil and gas operations for decades,” he said.

Expected to open a flood gate of opportunities for Bonny and its people upon completion, the 40 kilometre Bodo/Bonny road project is what many across the region are desperately waiting for. In its absence, the people of the oil-rich island have had their lives reduced to a living hell due to fury of the sea and ruthless pirates who prowl it constantly. For many of the residents, moving in and out of Bonny has now become a journey of death.