

# We watched as our loved ones were burnt to death – Relatives of Gombe tanker fire victims

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## *Chima Azubuike*

Bomala, a small community in Gombe State, is yet to recover from the horror that greeted it a few days ago. Everywhere you turn to in the small settlement, traces of horror still dot the landscape, speaking volumes of the extent of the carnage it is still trying to recover from. Last week Saturday, at about mid-day, a tanker laden with premium motor spirit, went up in flames after an accident, bringing chaos on the entire place. Vehicles, motorcycles, electricity poles, houses and even humans – everything around the place were consumed.

When *Saturday PUNCH* visited the community earlier in the week, even though life was gradually returning back to the area, the scars of the tragedy could be visibly seen on almost every home. Both young and old, the people lamented their loss, expressed sadness at the deaths of their loved ones whom they watched die in the fire.

Yusuf Idris, a 21-year-old mechanic, was said to be coming after fixing a vehicle when he was consumed by the fire. According to his distraught mother, Hawa Mele, the demise of her son is a terrible blow to the family.

“My son was coming back from work on Saturday when he was caught in the fire around the Bypass area.

“He was on a motorcycle and unfortunately fell off the bike as they were passing through the place. All efforts to save him proved abortive. We watched him die in agony, we couldn’t save him,” the 47-year-old woman said.

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For family members of Jubrin Abubakar, 35, last Saturday’s tanker fire in Gombe is one that they would never forget for the rest of their lives. That day, the real estate practitioner, who had three wives, was on his way to meet with one of his wives when he was caught in the horrific fire that left the entire city in panic. Now gone forever, those he left behind are finding it tough to accept the reality of his demise.

“He was our breadwinner. He took care of the entire family including his three wives and 11 children.

“He was coming back from the home of one of his wives before his motorcycle was engulfed in the inferno. He was burnt to death. It is a pity we could not save his life,” Zetu Abubakar, the victim’s mother, said.

The pain of losing a breadwinner is yet to settle in Bomala quarters, home of 17-year-old Ibrahim Mohammed, a Junior Secondary School 3 pupil of Herwagana Secondary School until his death. The teenager supplied people water for a living to support his education and family members before the incident claimed his life.

His mother, Hajiya Zara, said, “Mohammed was the bread winner of the family even at his young age.

“He supplied people water in the morning before going to school and after school, he resumed back to truck pushing.

“He had eight siblings and never wanted any of us to suffer. That was how much he loved and catered for us. It is a pity that the tanker fire took him away from us. We will miss him sorely.”

Abdulrahman and Zubairu Mohammed, 15 and 17 respectively, lost their lives when they were heading to a nearby market to get ingredients for stew. Their elder brother, Abubakar, a bus driver, told *Saturday PUNCH* that the news of the death of their loved ones came to them as a rude shock.

“They were on their way to get ingredients for stew when they were caught in the fire.

“That day was my wedding and it came as a terrible shock to us when we heard the news of the incident. When we rushed to the scene, it was their burnt bodies that we saw in the fire. I don’t know if we will ever be able to recover from this big loss,” he said.



Mamman Adamu, 20, lived with his aunt at a village named Toga before the incident happened. A welder by profession, he was coming from the Boronde area of the city when he was caught in the fire. According to the victim’s

father, Adamu Lele, the young man is currently between life and death at a hospital.

“Mamman had a job to attend to in Boronde, so he took transport to the place before the accident.

“He just got a wife recently and now this accident has damaged his body and left him in serious crisis. I am only praying to God to preserve his life. His injuries are very serious,” he stated.

Rukaya Mohammed and her daughter, Meriam, are currently both admitted at the burns unit of the hospital due to the intensity of the burns they suffered during the tanker fire. For them, life has become more difficult since that period.

“I live in Akko Local Government Area but on the day the incident occurred, I was in my brother’s house.

“We suddenly heard a blast and before we knew what was happening, we were engulfed in the fire. We had to summon the courage to escape from the place. But at that time, our bodies had been burnt already.

“My daughter cries all the time. She is not able to sleep at night, she is experiencing a lot of pains. The fire has brought us so much agony,” she said.

Auwal Usman, until last Saturday’s tragedy, could boast of a car and a house. But following the tanker fire, he had lost everything he ever worked for. This is aside from sustaining life-threatening burns and injuries during the incident. He lies in a precarious state at the hospital.

“My car was parked outside the house, my family members came because of a wedding ceremony we had at our compound.

“Soon I heard a blast and smoke was everywhere. I heard my son, Muhammad, shouting and that was how we all escaped.

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“Before I could do anything, my car was engulfed in fire while I was also burnt by the inferno. I have been in the hospital since then and the pain is very intense,” he said.

Kadija Abubakar is a young mother of six children. She lives in one of the affected buildings in Bomala. She told *Saturday PUNCH* that life had not been the same for them since that ugly incident.

“Immediately I noticed the fire, I moved my children to a safe room. Fortunately, nothing happened to them but as I was doing that, my back was burnt by the fire. I have been in pains since that time,” she said.

Salisu Adamu, 16, is currently battling for his life at the burns unit of a government-owned hospital in the state. He was passing through the scene of the accident that fateful day when he was caught in the fire. He was badly burnt and now hover between life and death on the hospital bed. His father, Pa Adamu, has not left his bedside since that period, hoping that he would make it out alive at the end.



*Auwal's burnt car*

“My son was taking mobile phones to the market to charge due to lack of power supply when he was caught up in that fire incident that day.

“He was terribly burnt by the fire and ended up in the hospital. I am really praying to God to spare his life because his condition is really critical,” the old man said.

Like Adamu, Abba Abdulhamidu is another victim of last week's tanker fire in Gombe. Residing in Kano, he was on a visit to his uncle, Basiru Musa, in the city when the tragedy occurred. Badly burnt by the fire, he is also battling for his life at the hospital at the moment.

“My nephew came to Gombe State to visit me and my family when this incident happened,” Musa told our correspondent at the hospital where doctors are working hard to save his life and the that of other victims.’ “He came with a complete body but now no longer complete. He was caught in fire and this has damaged his body and put his life in danger.

“He was on his way out when he was entangled in the ugly incident,” Musa added.

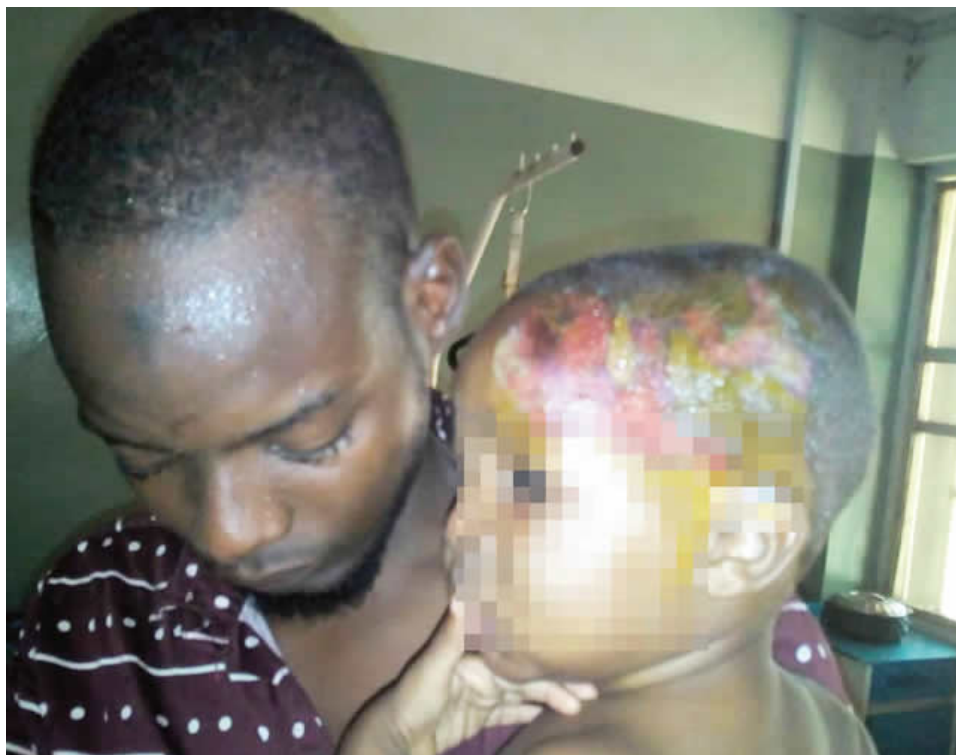
Suleiman Abubakar, a young man, who ekes out daily living by collecting rubber scraps, told *Saturday PUNCH* that he lost his entire business to the fire.

“We noticed how the driver was struggling to control his wheels, unfortunately the tanker had a break failure before getting to the bridge connecting Bomala to other parts of Gombe.

“As the tanker was coming, it was clearing bikes, tricycles and every other thing on its way before it finally fell into the canal beneath the bridge and spilled its content everywhere.

“Soon, the entire place was engulfed in fire. I lost over two tons of rubber that I had collected and was going to sell for N90,000. It is a big loss for me.

“Before the fire started, the tanker separated into two parts, with the head remaining on the Bomala bridge and the tank falling into the canal.



“The tanker collided with a truck belonging to a table water company. It was a serious fire accident that claimed over 15 lives,” he said.

According to Abdulrasheed Musa, who told *Saturday PUNCH* that it took fire fighters over four hours to put out the inferno, the tragedy was a huge one.

“Initially when the tanker carrying petrol went up in flames, we waited all through for men of the fire service.

“When they finally came, they came with an empty truck that had no water in it. They soon left the scene and promised to return,” he said.

The Gombe State Government has announced that it would offset the medical bills of all those affected by the tanker fire. Speaker of the state House of Assembly, Nasiru Nono, made the disclosure while visiting victims at the hospital.

“Governor Ibrahim Dankwambo is pained by this incident and as an arm of government, we intend to discuss about the need to have another by-pass around the area the accident happened because what we have now can no longer cater for our population,” he said.

When our correspondent visited the Gombe State Fire Service Area Command office, a high-ranking official denied allegations that they defaulted in their responsibility to tackle the fire.

“We are professionals, when we got to the venue, we noticed that we will not succeed from that position, so we had to take another route.

“We were obstructed by the crowd at the place, we could not force our way through. Our appeals for them to make way for us to gain access to the place fell on deaf ears.

“The petrol tanker was heading to Borno when the incident happened,” the official said.

Speaking on the death, Police Public Relation Officer in Gombe, SP Mary Margaret, said, “Based on information available to us, there have been 15 deaths and a number of injured persons from the incident.”