

Church members burnt in Lagos pipeline explosion

Published December 6, 2019



•Photos: Stanley Ogidi

• Police arrest pastor for pipeline vandalism

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Residents of the Gloryland Estate in the Isheri-Olofin, Igando area of Lagos State were thrown into panic on Thursday as a pipeline belonging to the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation exploded in the area.

The fire, which started around 7.45am, was said to have killed one person, injured one other and burnt bridges made of planks in the area before the intervention of emergency management workers.

Men of the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, the Rapid Response Squad and policemen from surrounding divisions were said to have responded to the disaster.

PUNCH Metro gathered that suspected vandals had ruptured the NNPC pipeline and siphoned fuel for several days before the explosion on Thursday.

Our correspondents learnt from residents that those caught up in the inferno were having a spiritual bath around a stream in the area.

While a man, who sustained 99 degree burns died on the spot, the second victim was said to have sustained about 70 per cent burns and was admitted to the Igando General Hospital for treatment.

It was gathered that the men, who were not aware that petrol from the vandalised pipeline had flowed into the stream, lighted a candle and were engulfed in flames.

A resident, who spoke to *PUNCH Metro* on condition of anonymity, said upon sighting the fire, the pastor conducting the cleansing escaped, leaving his church members behind.

He said, “The pastor was conducting cleansing for his members in the stream, not knowing that petrol had flowed into the water.

“Immediately they lit a candle for the cleansing, the whole place was engulfed in fire. The pastor escaped, but the members were not so lucky.”

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A police source said pipeline vandalism appeared a popular venture among the residents of the area, adding that sacks used to convey stolen fuel were recovered in the bush.

“That place is where they siphon fuel regularly. The residents cannot say they don’t know what is happening. We found kegs and sacks. Inside the sacks were nylons, where they pour the fuel. They use the sacks to conceal and convey the fuel,” he added.

The Public Relations Officer, Lagos State Emergency Management Agency, Nosa Okunbor, confirmed one death, adding that the second victim was in a critical condition.

“What we gathered from bystanders was that the victims were performing a spiritual cleansing when the fire met them there and burnt them. But the pastor escaped. We saw the sponge they used for the spiritual exercise at the scene,” he said.

The Public Affairs Officer of the Lagos State Fire Service, Jamiu Dosumu, said two fire stations deployed men in the scene to extinguish the fire.

“The fire started from a pipeline, went through a canal and met some people undertaking a spiritual bath. One of them died, while the other suffered severe burns. Fire stations from Ikotun and Abesan responded to the emergency,” he stated.

The Police Public Relations Officer in the state, Bala Elkana, said a pastor and one other suspect, identified as Smart Adeyemi, had been arrested.

Elkana explained that the pastor had denied knowledge of the activities of vandals in the area, but when his premises were searched, kegs of stolen fuel were recovered.

Elkana stated, “The fire started deep in the bush. The only building close to the scene is owned by a pastor. Looking closely at him, you will know he is aware of what is happening. The police interrogated him, but he denied the knowledge of anything.

“The police decided to search the vicinity and found a lot of kegs of siphoned fuel, all of them hidden in his house. He is already in custody.”

He said the second suspect, Adeyemi, claimed that he came from Ikorodu with nine others to siphon fuel in the area.

The PPRO stated, “The man said 10 of them were actually based in Bayelsa State, from where they came to Ikorodu to siphon fuel. He said the nine others might be trapped. Since the fire had not been completely extinguished; we don’t know their fate. Maybe when the fire finally goes off, we will search for them.

“We found the fowl that the victims brought for the cleansing. They were in their white garment when they were caught by the fire. They were said to have fasted for some days before going for the

exercise.”

The police spokesman added that while the pastor was arrested in the Ipaja area, Adeyemi was apprehended in Igando, adding that both locations were routes of the affected pipeline.

The Group Manager, Group Public Affairs Division, NNPC, Mr Samson Makoji, clarified that the pipeline was in the Baruwa swamp along the System 2B.

Makoji said in a statement that the pipeline fire occurred along the Atlas Cove-Mosimi Pipeline, which is also called the System 2B Pipeline, in the Baruwa swamp area of Lagos.

“Preliminary reports of the incident indicated that the pipeline might have been torched by an act of vandalism by suspected oil thieves, who hacked into the line to intercept the flow of petrol,” he stated.

The NNPC manager added that the breach had no impact on the supply of petrol in the area, adding that the vandalised pipeline would soon be put back into operation.

The spokesperson for the Igando General Hospital, Abimbola Salahu-Badejo, said the two victims were relatives, adding that the survivor had third degree burns.

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She noted that nurses administered first aid on him before he was transferred to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja.

The Chief Medical Director of LASUTH, Prof. Adetokunbo Fabanwo, confirmed that the victim was in the hospital, but said his chances of survival were slim.

“He has 98 per cent burns. We are doing our best to increase his chances of survival. We will not spare an effort, but it will take a miracle,” he added.

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