High rate of electrocution, unpardonable

Published January 1, 2020

Electrocution. File photo

NIGERIA's notoriously inefficient electricity industry has degenerated into a constant source of fatalities. To substantiate this, the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission has just given an insight into the niggling safety millstone blighting the industry, stating that electrocution rose significantly in the second quarter of 2019. In those three months, scores of people were burnt to ashes, some of them innocent victims, while the others were employees of the electricity distribution companies. For a country also hobbled by perennial electricity shortages, this is a double whammy.

Regrettably, NERC's Q2 report that was released at the tail end of 2019, underpins the systemic rot in the power sector. In summary, the regulator averred that at least three persons were electrocuted every week between April and June 2019 across the land. This is a huge loss. Indubitably, it calls to mind the legendary disregard for the sanctity of human life here, where Nigerians die cheaply from a myriad of avoidable occurrences.

In its explanation, the regulator specifically traced the fatalities to the declining operating standards in the power sector. "The commission received a total of 73 health and safety reports out of the 87 reports expected from the 29 operators in the second quarter of 2019," NERC said. In contrast, the previous health and safety reports confirmed a reduction in accidents. Out of the 80 reports NERC received in Q4 2018, 16 cases of electrocution and two injuries were recorded respectively. Although there was no NERC enforcement the following quarter, things got better.

According to the regulator, 72 health and safety reports came up in Q1 2019, out of which 10 deaths and seven injuries occurred. In that period, NERC implemented six separate enforcements. Curiously, this did not translate into the desired improved practices from the operators in Q2 2019, with deaths exceeding the previous two quarters. This is unpardonable. The fatality count ought to be reducing, instead of increasing.

In this, Nigerians woke up to a truly tragic day sometime in April 2017 after learning of the electrocution of nine persons at a football viewing centre in Calabar, the capital of Cross River State. The calamity occurred as a loose live wire dropped on the centre where the fans were watching a UEFA Champions League quarterfinal match. Independent reports put the casualty rate as far higher than the official count. Apparently, that monumental tragedy did not push the distribution company operating in that area to move fast and guard against future incidents.

In October 2017, an undergraduate of the Cross River State University of Technology, David Inyang, and a nursing mother identified simply as Rebecca, were electrocuted in the same Cross River State capital. As is common when the wires are weak and hang precariously, a loose one fell on their house, igniting an inferno that consumed them and parts of the property. To mitigate their loss, the Inyang family demanded a compensation of N10 million from the Port Harcourt Electricity Distribution Company in charge of the state.

Sadly, the three pivots in the industry – the government-controlled Transmission Company of Nigeria; the Generation Companies and the Distribution Companies – are encumbered. The last two legs were privatised in 2013 to catalyse the expected energy revolution in Africa's largest economy, whose average output has oscillated between 3,000 and 4,000 megawatts.

Along this line, consumers transmitted 136,393 complaints about the negligence of the 11 DisCos in Q4 2018. The complaints jumped to 151,938 the following quarter with the major issues coalescing around service interruption, delayed connection, load shedding, metering, estimated billing, disconnection and poor voltage.

Consequently, the initial optimism that greeted the sales of the electricity assets has dissipated, giving way to more darkness, despair and preventable deaths. Like before, electricity wires dangle precariously nearly everywhere in the country. As it is, the DisCos – the weakest of the lot – cannot invest in basic maintenance of the legacy assets they acquired. In this, dangling/damaged electric poles carrying wires are not replaced interminably, even after they have caused injuries and deaths. The carcass of faulty, burnt or vandalised transformers litters the whole place. It is no wonder that Nigerians are permanently tormented by blackouts, injuries and untimely deaths.

In other jurisdictions, the public is paramount when electricity companies commit infractions. Take the case of India's capital, where the Delhi Electricity Regulatory Commission in 2018, introduced a new fine of $1.4 per hour on the three distribution companies there for unscheduled outages, according to DERC. The fine is to be paid to every consumer within a month, which will be deducted from the bill payment. In the event of a default, the fine increases to $70.1.

Therefore, to cut out these catastrophic incidents here, NERC has to get tougher with the industry operators. Although monetary compensation cannot restore human life, a hefty compensation package that will hit the bottom line of the DisCos will go a long way in cutting out their (DisCos) negligence. Instead of claiming pittance when such accidents occur, the families of the victims should demand sizeable compensation packages through the legal system. While making its channels of communication more user-friendly, it (NERC) should resolve these sad occurrences swiftly to lessen the pains of the victims' families.

For now, it is patently evident that the DisCos are ploughing little investment into their operations. As a counter measure, NERC should compel them to invest seriously in their equipment, giving them a firm deadline to replace all the worn-out wires, poles, transformers and other basic equipment to aid the efficient distribution of electricity.

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