

Principal, 16 others killed, 50 houses razed in Lagos gas plant explosion

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Scene of the explosion

Our correspondents

No fewer than 17 persons have been confirmed dead and 25 others injured after a gas explosion rocked the Abule-Ado area, near the International Trade Fair Complex, Amuwo Odofin Local Government Area of Lagos State on Sunday.

More than 50 buildings in the area were impacted by the explosion, as hundreds of residents were rendered homeless.

Several vehicles parked in the area were also destroyed by the explosion.

Boarding pupils of the Bethlehem Girls College were trapped in the wreckage of their hostel, as residents and sympathisers pulled them out of the rubble.

PUNCH Metro learnt that the Principal of the college, Rev. Sr. Henritta Alokha, lost her life while attempting to rescue the pupils.

Our correspondents were told that the explosion occurred around 9am after a truck hit some gas cylinders in a gas processing plant.

The gas plant was located near the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation's System 2B pipeline's right of way.

A witness, who identified himself simply as Chibuzor, said his neighbour, who was just delivered of a baby, was trapped after her residence caved in.

He said, "We were in the church when it happened. At first, we thought it was a tanker explosion and we ran out of the church to see what had happened. But on getting out, we saw fire raging.

"My brother's house was affected and a woman, who just gave birth, was in the house. We cannot hear her voice and she is not picking her calls.

"Immediately the explosion happened, the chapel of the school, where the children were gathered for morning mass, collapsed. Some were trapped underneath the rubble, while some have been rescued and rushed to hospital."

A Twitter user, Alexehi Imobhio, said he was also in church when the explosion occurred.

"It felt like it exploded on the church premises. All the windows were shattered and worshippers ran for their lives. It was my first day in church after over four years," he said.

The Lagos State Emergency Management Agency said 17 people were confirmed dead, adding that 25 were injured.

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The Public Affairs Officer of the agency, Nosa Okunbor, said there was a series of explosions, which started around 9.05am.

He stated, “The incident, which recorded 17 dead and 25 injured, destroyed property estimated to worth hundreds of millions of naira, with unquantifiable devastation to other assets, as well as the environment.

“Aside these, people in their hundreds have suddenly become displaced in an incident in which two LASEMA response teams, as well as the Lagos State Government Fire Service, the Rapid Response Squad of the Nigeria Police and other first responders were in full attendance.”

While quoting the Director-General of LASEMA, Femi Oke-Osanyintolu, he said the agency could not tell the primary cause of the incident.

“While security agents are investigating the cause of the explosion, recovery and rescue activities were carried out by the Ministry of Special Duties, LASEMA, men of the Lagos State Fire Service, the Federal Fire Service Department, the Lagos State Safety Commission, LASBCA and other first responders.

“Seventeen bodies have been recovered, while 25 injured persons are being treated on site,” he added.

The National Emergency Management Agency said it recovered 15 corpses, including a family of four.

The spokesperson for the South-West, Ibrahim Farinloye, said a couple and their two sons were among those who died in the explosion.

He said they were on their way to church when the incident happened.

According to him, no fewer than 60 pupils of the Bethlehem Girls College, who sustained varying degrees of injury, were taken to the Nigerian Navy Hospital in Satellite Town.

Farinloye said over 50 buildings, including the college and a popular hotel, were damaged by the explosion.

He stated, “The resulting fire later spread to the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation oil pipeline passing through the area even though the pipeline has been shut down as a precautionary measure.

“The fire was eventually extinguished around 3.30pm through the combined efforts of officials of the Lagos State Fire Service, Federal Fire Service and the Nigerian Navy Fire Tender.”

The Group General Manager, Group Public Affairs Division, NNPC, Kennie Obateru, explained that preliminary findings indicated that the impact of the explosion was so huge that it led to the collapse of nearby houses and damage to the pipeline.

The corporation’s Group Managing Director, Mele Kyari, and other management staff of the oil firm were said to have left for Lagos on Sunday evening for an on-the-spot assessment.

Obateru stated that following the report of the explosion, the corporation halted pumping operations on the Atlas Cove-Mosimi pipeline, which was active at the time.

The NNPC said it had already mobilised its in-house team, consisting of health safety environment experts, medical and security personnel from its nearby Satellite Town depot in Lagos, adding that the Lagos State Fire Service was mobilised to extinguish the fire.

The corporation said more firefighting personnel and equipment were mobilised from the NNPC Mosimi area office to the scene.

It urged members of the public and residents of the affected communities to remain calm, adding that the temporary shutdown of the petroleum products pipeline would not affect the normal supply of products to Lagos and its environs.

The Staff Officer, Western Naval Command, Oladele Daji, told journalists that the injured pupils had been stabilised at the Navy Hospital, adding that those who had fully recovered would be discharged soon.

During a visit to the Bonne Sante Hospital, where most of the pupils were rushed for treatment, one of the pupils, Ebube Abana, 15, said the explosion occurred while the Mass was being celebrated in the refectory.

“I am a boarding student; we were in the refectory when a car blew up. We were having Mass when I came outside and as I heard the explosion, blood started coming out of my ear, so I started running for my safety,”

The school's Hostel Mistress, Christiana Adedoyin, said one of the security guards at the school died from the effect of the building collapse during the explosion.

One Frederick Ose, whose brother, Festus, died during the incident, said, "My brother wanted to have his child dedication today (Sunday) when the incident happened and he was killed. His wife and children were able to escape. It was not the fire that killed him."

Another resident, Ebis Michael, said his uncle, Obi Iyio, his wife and two children, Tochukwu and Kachi, were about to go to church when the explosion occurred and they were burnt beyond recognition.

The Chairman of the Amuwo Odofin Local Government Area, Valentine Buraimoh, said three schools were affected.

The President, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd), condoled with the families of the victims.

Buhari also consoled all those who lost property to the incident or were affected in any way, according to a statement by his Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Mr Garba Shehu.

He commiserated with the Lagos State Government and all those affected by the incident.

Buhari was quoted as saying, "I have received with sadness the news of this unfortunate incident, which caused loss of lives and property.

"A misfortune of whatever scale anywhere is a tragedy to the country, and while the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation makes efforts to determine the cause of the incident, I send my deepest and profound sympathies to the victims, their families, the government and people of Lagos State."

The All Progressives Congress also commiserated with victims of the explosion.

The National Publicity Secretary of the APC, Mallam Lanre Issa-Onilu, in a statement expressed sadness over the incident and lauded the emergency responders.

Issa-Onilu said, “We commend the emergency response led by the National Emergency Management Agency, the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency, the fire service and other agencies in quickly containing the incident and attending to the injured victims of the explosion.

“While the party deeply condoles with families and loved ones over recorded deaths, we also wish the injured a speedy and full recovery and sympathise with residents, who lost property in the explosion.

“We are confident that the Lagos State Government will implement measures to bring succour to the victims.”

The President of the Senate, Ahmad Lawan, also commiserated with victims.

Lawan, according to a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Ola Awoniyi, also sympathised with those who were injured and those who lost property to the inferno.

He called on the relevant authorities and agencies to get to the root of the incident with a view to forestalling a recurrence.

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The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabiamila, also expressed sadness over the explosion.

Gbajabiamila called for calm as the state government makes frantic efforts to ascertain the cause of the incident.

The Speaker commended the Lagos State Government as well as relevant agencies for taking action following the explosion.

In a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Lanre Lasisi, Gbajabiamila said everything should be done to avert the reoccurrence of such incidents in the future.

The Governor of Lagos State, Mr Babajide Sanwo-Olu, who visited the scene, instructed officials of the Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency to release personal safety equipment, such as face and nose protection masks, to first responders and residents of the affected area.

Sanwo-Olu, in a statement, said the protective equipment would prevent any form of medical hazards, such as respiratory infections, by the residents who might unknowingly inhale toxic substances from the explosion.

He reiterated the need for residents to maintain a safe distance and avoid breathing in polluted air.

The governors of Ekiti and Ondo, Kayode Fayemi and Rotimi Akeredolu, respectively, commiserated with their Lagos State counterpart and the families of the victims as well as residents and business owners, who lost property to the fire incident that followed the explosion.

In separate statements, the governors regretted the huge losses recorded in the incident and urged those who lost their relatives and property not to lose hope in the face of the disaster.

According to them, the development reinforced the need for caution and vigilance on the part of all Nigerians irrespective of their status.