

# Azare: Inside Bauchi town of mysterious deaths

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## ARMSTRONG BAKAM

Dried tears plastered the soft cheeks of Auwalu Nuhu who lost his 28-year-old wife on May 19 in Azare, a town in the headquarters of Katagum Local Government Area of Bauchi State. Nuhu dejectedly told *Sunday PUNCH* that his wife died during the birth of his third child who is alive and doing well.

He told our correspondent that his wife's death was one of the many deaths recorded in the town, revealing that in his area, over 20 died within the period.

Nuhu, who described the deaths as act of God, added that it was also the destiny of the dead. He also noted that it was due to the excessive heat in the town considered as the second biggest town in the state after Bauchi, the state capital.

He said, “Actually, there were deaths in Azare in recent times but everyone has his own destiny. The way God has decreed it, we all owe death. In my area, Kasuwan Kaji which is inside Azare town, close to 25 people died.

“When it’s your destiny, there’s nothing anybody can do about it. I know about four to five people who also died like my wife during childbirth and it was due to the excessive heat that we had this year.”

He described the majority of the victims as elders and prominent persons aged 60 and above, ruling out the possibility of them dying from the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The COVID-19 has affected millions globally and killed thousands including having adverse effects on critical sectors of world economies.

Nuhu stressed that some of the victims had been sick for three to four years and God kept them till the time they died. He added, “I can tell you that they showed no signs of COVID-19 and in Azare town, it was only one worker with the Federal Medical Centre who went to Kano and returned with the disease and died later. I am unaware of any other death associated with COVID-19.

“There’s a father of one of my friends who was a diabetic and with high blood pressure for long. He also died during this period. So, that’s the situation.”

## **The controversy**

The deaths in Azare raised fears when a former member of the House of Representatives, Ibrahim Baban and an ex-House of Representatives aspirant, Musa Azare, raised the alarm.

They linked the deaths to COVID-19 as the country grappled with the virus in many states. But the People’s Democratic Party-led government in the state faulted the claim, saying as the two politicians belonged to the All Progressives Congress party, the assertion weren’t strange to it.

While Baba said over 100 died within a week in Azare to coronavirus, Azare claimed that 301 fresh graves were dug at a cemetery located in the heart of the town. In a letter he wrote and dated May 8, 2020 and addressed to the President, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd), through the

Secretary to the Government of the Federation, and Chairman, Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, Boss Mustapha, Baba, who represented Katagum Federal Constituency of the state, said, “The situation has thrown the entire area into great mourning, panic and confusion.”

In the letter entitled ‘Massive COVID-19 outbreak in Azare: Request for urgent action’, he said the proximity of Azare to Bauchi, Kano and some major cities of Jigawa State made the town’s large population susceptible to the virus due to the large cases of the disease in the identified areas.

### **Relatives mourn loved ones**

For Ahmad Sanusi, the death of his father, Sanusi Izala, came as a great shock because though his father suffered from ulcer, his death came at a time he wasn’t expecting it.

His father who died at 58 was a known businessman in transport industry in Bauchi particularly in Azare town. He died on May 4.

“He died while we were taking him to the hospital. He treated ulcer for a long time and for three days he never ate. He took only water and didn’t tell us until the ulcer became chronic. He told us only when he could no longer eat,” he said.

On the news that deaths in the community was caused by COVID-19, he said, “It’s untrue because if the deaths were as a result COVID-19, I can tell you that the whole of Azare would have died

“Since they said that one of the ways of transmitting COVID-19 is close interaction and handshakes, if it was in the town, the whole Azare would have died or only few people would be left.

“If my father had died of the virus, all of us in the house would have contracted it because we were close to him. I am his oldest son and we did most things together. I am okay and it’s more than two weeks and I have no symptoms of the virus.”

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Sanusi talked about his last moments with his father who he described as a ‘nice and gentle person’, saying his death was painful to him and he had been unable to get over it.

He added, “I cannot imagine the pain I feel losing him. He was my father and close friend. I am the first child and it’s painful. Anytime I sleep, I wake up in the night to think about him. When I took him to the hospital, I didn’t know he was going to die. Sometimes, when the tear comes, I can’t control them.

“We were always together and we were taking him to the hospital when he gave up. He told me he was feeling heat and that we should take him to the hospital. I brought my car and he said he wanted to rest. But I insisted that he should let us go. He stood up and walked to the car. Suddenly, he fell down and refused that we take him to a particular hospital except another one he mentioned. It wasn’t long and he didn’t say anything again till he died. It was on the way to the hospital that he died.”

He linked the ‘mysterious’ deaths in the town to the weather in the area as, according to him, there were times every year when some people died in the town.

“Sometimes you see that it’s the youth that are dying. Sometimes, it is prominent people and other times, the elderly. Sometimes, it’s women or other times children. This happens in Azare every year and this time, it’s the elderly.

“It’s the weather; heat. You know Azare is hot and heat aggravates sicknesses. If you ask health experts, they will tell you about this. That’s when you see filled hospitals without empty beds and it’s during the hot period that it happens.

“Take for instance, during harmattan, you’ll discover that the sick are not usually much. It is only this period that you’ll go to the hospital and there won’t be any space. These deaths are caused by heat and nothing more,” he stated.

Another resident of the town, Abdulkadir Adamu, a relative of the current Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, stated that the death of his grandmother on the first day of the Ramadan at age 109, shocked him

He said the late Hajiya Fatima Adamu nursed him for over 30 years because of his closeness to her, adding that he was sad over her death.

Adamu described the deceased as generous, caring and humble, stating that her generosity never allowed her to differentiate between her biological and other children she catered for.

“On Thursday, her mood started changing to the extent that at about 6pm that day, she couldn’t talk and she lost her strength and energy. I couldn’t even cry when I was called at about 3.30am that I should come to the house. I went and I was told that she had died. I miss her a lot,” he said.

Speaking on his last interaction with her a day before she died, Adamu said that his grandmother advised him to always relate peacefully with his relatives.

Adamu stated that the deaths in the town weren’t caused by COVID-19, noting that if the autopsies of the dead were conducted, it would be discovered that they weren’t connected to COVID-19.

“Some were diabetics, some took ill briefly while some were healthy. So, we don’t do justice to the deceased if we link the deaths in Azare to coronavirus. Some of them could be caused by coronavirus. But there is a record at the cemetery with the names of the dead and coronavirus was not included in the register,” he said.

A former member of the National Assembly, who represented Katagum Federal Constituency in the 7th Assembly, Auwalu Saleh, said he heard of the rumour of COVID-19 deaths in his hometown, Azare.

He also said the death of his father wasn’t linked to coronavirus.

He said, “I spoke with the locals there and I tried to find out exactly what was happening there over the phone. Something spectacular happened this year. You know the fasting period takes close to a month every year.

“This fasting period is done during extreme heat and this period was the hottest in more than 20 years. And with this COVID-19, people would like to take a shortcut and say it is COVID-19 but COVID-19 is something that has to be tested and proven.

“We have the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control who has information about such incident. But what I know about the deaths in Azare, people who I know that have died are the aged and like I told you, heat has a debilitating effect on people already under high blood pressure and other issues. The ages of people dying correspond with the temperature and situation we find ourselves in.”

Speaking about his father’s death, he said,” When you talk about my father who passed away not long ago, he had a fall and another fall two or three days later. After the second fall, he became weak and by the evening, he could not even speak. We took him to the hospital and he went into a coma and after 48 hours of being in the coma, he died.

“For me, my brothers and sisters who know what happened, we know that whatever you want to classify it, it was the fall. He was 81 and true, like other elderly people, he had high blood pressure and he had been taking medications for the last 10 or so years.”

The former lawmaker said he had a great time with his father the last time they met.

“By the time I got to Azare, he was already in a coma. The last time we met was in Abuja in April and he was hale and hearty and we even took photographs. We had a fantastic time because all my brothers were there,” he said.

He described his father, who was a chief judge, as a straightforward person.

Another resident, Mohammed Al-amin Muktar, also said his father, Mallam Mukhtar Ahmad, a former Chairman of the Bauchi State Shari’a Service Commission, who was 77, didn’t die of COVID-19.

He said that though some aged people died in Azare, their deaths weren’t caused by COVID-19.

He recalled the last moments with his father, adding, “The last moment I had with him was when we brought food to him in the morning. He ate it all. I asked him if I could add more food but he said no. He drank the drink I gave him and after that, he lay down and slept. In the evening, when I came back to see him, my brother told me that his breathing was becoming heavy. We rushed him to

the hospital and he was placed on oxygen. After about three hours, he regained consciousness and we talked. I even called my mum and they spoke. Shortly after that, he couldn't talk again but only nodded his head. Around 6am, he stopped breathing.”

### **Community leaders speak**

Speaking on the matter, the Galadiman Katagum in Katagum Emirate Council, Usman Abdullahi, noted that there were no incidents of mysterious deaths in Azare based on records available to him.

He said, “Honestly, from available records, we have one major burial ground in Azare and we have a register there. Since the Friday that the Ramadan started till now, the last corpse that was buried was number 110. That was during a period of 16 days.

“Further investigation from those who work at the cemetery shows that an average number of deaths per day is normally between nine and 10 and if it's much, it will be about 12.”

The district head of Katagum added that there must have been communication gap, adding that major hospital in the town had 60 beds and admitted 24 out of which nobody died.

He stated, “Since there is no death, one wonders where such a number of people are coming from. Only one patient was transferred to Bauchi not because his condition was critical. He was transferred because he used to go to isolation centre. They felt the best thing was to take him away from home so that they could control him there.”

Another community leader, the Sarkin Yakin Nassarawa, Mallam Ahmad Alhaji-Azare, said the many deaths linked to the town weren't true.

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He said, “We enquired at the main cemetery in Azare and we found out that it wasn't true. From the day Ramadan started to the 15th day, 156 people died. But I know that deaths have occurred since then including that of prominent persons.”

Alhaji-Azare who is also a lecturer with Aminu Saleh College of Education, Azare, also said the deaths were not related to coronavirus.

He stated that such deaths weren't new to the town because they had happened before.

He said: "It is not COVID-19 that caused the deaths. The truth is that, about two years ago, we recorded such deaths but it was the youth that died. Also, when someone dies, the mobile of his relatives is usually taken and a form will be filled on the cause of his or her death. From the deaths recorded, there was none linked to coronavirus except a woman suspected to have died of the disease.

"But even these days, there have been many deaths including that of prominent people. In fact, a traditional chief in Azare died."

### **Deaths not linked to COVID-19 –Doctor**

A medical doctor at the FMC, Azare, Dr Abdulrahman Abubakar, dismissed the claim linking the Azare deaths to COVID-19. He noted that such was not known to the hospital.

Abubakar, a one-time Bauchi State Chairman of the Nigerian Medical Association, said people only rushed to give out false information about developments.

### **Government reacts**

The Bauchi State Deputy Governor, Baba Tela, said the deaths were seasonal especially during hot season.

He spoke during a press conference at the Government House.

He added, "The deaths are a seasonal thing in the area especially during the hot season when people with underlying illnesses get complications which always lead to deaths." He further stated that the deaths weren't in anyway related to COVID-19 pandemic.

Tela, who is an indigene of Azare, explained that the occurrence in the town was a spillover from Kano considering the proximity of the area to Kano and Jigawa states where related deaths also occurred.

The state governor, Senator Bala Mohammed, who debunked insinuations of massive deaths linked to COVID-19, however, said that from records available, within one month, about 150 people died of hypertension, childbirth and other diseases.

Mohammed, who spoke at a press conference at the Government House, said, “We have also reviewed the rumour about Azare that it has become a morgue. It’s untrue.

“We have even got the statistics of the deaths for the last 30 days; about 150 died in Azare and there was an average of eight deaths per day. Most of the deaths were caused by hypertension, childbirth and other diseases.

“It is not true that people are falling and dying in Azare. Even if that is the situation, we have moved there as a government and the person that handle the situation is the deputy governor himself.”