

We cry every day, can't sleep, eat, since our children's death –Mothers of Lagos children who died inside vehicle

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Scene of the incident

The silence that enveloped Adelayo Street, Jah-Michael, along the Lagos-Badagry Expressway could easily pass neighbourhood for a ghost town. That Tuesday afternoon, three days after the shocking death of eight kids in a parked vehicle, grief was still rife in the ambience.

Towards the end of the street, a brown gated compound under lock and key housed a black Honda Pilot inside which the children, aged between two and 12 met their tragic end last Saturday.

A number of people who walked past the house did so briskly as if it were a forbidden route. Two buildings away, an unpainted bungalow known for buzz and ecstasy had suddenly given way to mourning. Three of the eight victims – Zainab, 12; Abdulwahab, five, and Yakubu Isiaka, three – lived in the residence.

As one approached the building, the sight of sympathisers seated on mats spread under fruit trees and in the balcony was too distressed to ignore.

“The mother is still traumatised and distraught; she might not want to talk to you,” one of the sympathisers told our correspondent. “We can’t talk to you on her behalf as well because we weren’t there when the issue happened,” another quickly added in an unclear Yoruba accent.

Pains, travail of distraught mothers

At one time, Afusat Isiaka, the mother of the late three children, gazed into space. At another time, she forced a smile while responding to greetings.

“I lost three out of five children,” she remarked curtly when she eventually agreed to talk to *Saturday PUNCH*. “What a greater loss can befall a mother than this?” She wondered, flailing her hands in anticipation of a response to confirm her stance.

She continued, "My children got back from their Arabic class and ate. After that, I went to sleep. I woke up and started looking for them. It was not more than an hour when the search started that an old woman (popularly referred to as Alhaja) rushed in to call me.

"She was confused and asked me to come and see my children inside the vehicle in her compound. I was surprised about how they got there because the compound was usually locked. Her son got the car key and opened it. I met my three children dead alongside my neighbours' four children.

"The vehicle is tinted, so when I saw them, I ran out and cried for help. I told people to help me but no one came. It was as if I was running crazy. I ran into her compound and cried out again. Eventually, a guy came to help me. It was thereafter people started coming out. I pulled my children out to see if they were breathing but they weren't. In fact, I saw some moisture coming out of their mouth. I pulled them but they didn't move."

Speaking on moments leading to the tragic incident, Afusat said the death of her three children had brought sorrow she might live with for the rest of her life.

She lamented, "I miss my children, my daughter, Zainab, helped me go to the market, wash plates and do other things. I have been dealt with unfairly. My sons are precious to me; I haven't been myself since that day.

"They ate fish before their death. I was frying fish when they came back from the Arabic school, so I gave them part of it. After eating the fish, they drank water and went out to meet their brothers who were playing football outside the compound with some other boys in the neighbourhood.

"I am pregnant and need to rest. I was sleeping when they sneaked out of the house. How they got into the compound is still a mystery to me. My children don't usually enter other people's compounds; the only compound they enter is the house of our kinsmen. I just woke up when Alhaja called me to come and see my children."

Khadijah Rabani, a mother of four, also lost two of her children in the incident. Her daughters, Fareedah and Aisha Rabani, aged seven and three respectively, died in the vehicle.

She spoke incoherently saying, "*I don tire* (I am tired) I want my daughters, I miss them."

She added, "It's been so difficult accepting that they are no longer alive, they are my only daughters. Every time I hear their names, I can't help it. If tears could bring back my daughters, I am sure they would be back on their feet now. They were smart children. Even if they don't do anything for me, seeing them gives me joy."

Sleep has been far from these distraught mothers; they can't still wrap their heads around the fact that their children were dead.

Khadijah couldn't control her tears. "I am tired, It's like my world came crashing down. I lost two out of four children. I have been unable to eat or sleep," she said as tears welled up and spilled down her cheeks.

She went on, "Once I hear anyone mention my children's names, I can't control my emotions. Imagining that my children are gone is enough torture. Life has cruelly dealt with me."

Barratu Ibrahim, mother of Muhammed five-year-old Ibrahim (Taiye), and two-year-old Mahmud (Alaba), also lost her children and was too distraught to talk. Her children were cousins to the Rabanis.

Our children were killed, families allege

The bereaved families have alleged that the circumstances surrounding the death of their children were suspicious.

According to Afusat, a lot of things were fishy about the death of the children.

She said, “I was the first person who got there. The vehicle was intact. The women went inside to bring the car key. So, tell me how the children got into the vehicle?

“It was after we brought them out that people vandalised the vehicle out of anger. I lost two girls and one boy, where do I start from? I can neither eat nor sleep. What children will I give birth to that will be 12, five, and three years old tomorrow?”

Also, Afusat’s husband, Isiaka, shared the same belief, saying he suspected foul play as his children rarely entered other people’s compounds.

The only neighbour they visited was their Hausa brothers; the Rabanis and Ibrahims, who live about four buildings away.

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He said, “My wife has been ill since then. We have taken her to the hospital. She hasn’t eaten since then; she has been taken only drinks and she is weak. She gave the children food before she heard of their death. She gave birth to five children and lost three in one day.”

Families tackle police

The family members have also accused the police of trying to compromise the case.

Afusat stated, “When we got to the police station, Alhaja started saying that she went to call a welder after she saw the children in the vehicle. It was when I was shouting at her that her son went inside to bring the car key. So if the key was inside the house, how did the children enter the car and why didn’t she aim for the key rather than go to look for the welder?”

“When I saw the children, they weren’t sitting in different positions; they were stacked on one another, face down. By the time I pulled them out, none of them was breathing except the woman’s grandchild who sat in the front of the vehicle.

“Perhaps they used him as an alibi for killing our children. They put the boy in a car and rushed him to the hospital. When we asked that they should help to carry ours too, they asked if we wanted them to put ‘dead bodies’ on their heads. They zoomed off and left us. When they saw that people were enraged, they came back and told us that the boy was also dead but we didn’t see the boy’s remains.”

Isiaka also said he did not see the corpse of Alhaja’s grandson.

He said, “It was when we were burying our children that they brought something wrapped in a white piece of cloth and told us that it was the corpse of the boy. We don’t know if he truly died or not.”

Isiaka also alleged that the police gave them different narratives in an attempt “to sweep the case under the carpet.”

Isiaka said, “We reported the case to Morogbo Police Station. When we went back, they said that the woman (Alhaja) was mentally unstable and even if we took the case to court, a mad woman cannot be tried. The following day when we got to the police station, they said that Alhaja was dead. We said it was a lie and we demanded to see her corpse.

“To our surprise, when we were invited again to the police station, we met Alhaja there. The police then took us to Panti (the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department, Yaba). She even lied that we beat her. Angry youths broke the vehicle windscreen out of anger but we didn’t let them touch her. They would have lynched her if we had not intervened.”

Crazy bills discouraged us from autopsy

The families said they took the children to the General Hospital at Badagry to confirm the cause of their death but they could not afford “the high cost” of the autopsy.

Isiaka said, “We took them to the general hospital. We wanted to find out the cause of their death because the whole incident was shrouded in darkness.

“They told us that they don’t do autopsy at the Badagry General Hospital and that we would have to take the corpses to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital. They said it would cost N100,000 per corpse.

“Since we couldn’t afford that, we wanted to keep them at the mortuary for investigation to be carried out but we were told to pay N25,000 to embalm each body. We could not afford the bill, so we went to bury them.”

Govt should investigate

Afusat stated, “We want the government to investigate this issue. For how long can a child stay in the car before they die?”

Isiaka also stated, “The children don’t usually enter that compound. I am surprised they said the children were found in a vehicle in the house. There is nothing I can do but we want to know the truth.”

Khadijat added, “They said my children died of suffocation in the vehicle. They went missing within two hours and the children were said to have died in a compound that is always locked.

“When they were brought out of the vehicle, their corpses were not looking fresh at all. I appeal to the government to investigate the death of our children. The truth must prevail.”

Meanwhile, the state Police Public Relations Officer in the state, CSP Adekunle Ajisebutu, had in a statement on Sunday, said the Commissioner of Police, Hakeem Odumosu, had ordered a probe into the incident.

He had said, “Notwithstanding the report made to the police, the Commissioner of Police, Hakeem Odumosu, has ordered a thorough and speedy investigation into the circumstances surrounding their death. The CP also commiserates with the families of the victims.”

When contacted on Friday for an update on the matter, Ajisebutu promised to get back to our correspondent but had yet to do so as of the time of filing this report.

A consultant family physician at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja, Dr Oluwajimi Sodipo, had also told *The PUNCH* that it might take

between six and eight hours for the children to die from asphyxiation or excessive heat.

He noted that an autopsy, including a toxicology test, should be conducted on the victims to ascertain the cause of death.