

# Gombe community mourns drowning of four villagers, seeks link bridge

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28th August 2022



•Scene of the incident Photos: Chima Azubuike

**CHIMA AZUBUIKE** captures the incident which led to the death of a father, son and two others at Potaba River in Aya-kaleh community of Gombe State

**Tears** plastered the faces of many residents of Aya-kaleh community in the Kaltungo Local Government Area of Gombe State, after a 400-level student of the Federal University Kashere, Gombe State, Abdulrazak Mohammed, his father, 45-year-old Ibrahim Mohammed and two others drowned at Potaba River.

The undergraduate accompanied his father who owned a minivan popularly known as ‘kwakwa’ on the day of the accident when it had a technical fault while being driven on the way to Aya-kaleh community.

Aya-kaleh community is a rural area with many women and youths involved in farming and peasant businesses. They also fell trees to get firewood for use and Ibrahim was not left out as he delivered woods to shops where he could make money to fend for his family.

Part of Ibrahim’s daily schedule involved getting firewood from a forest around the mountainous area and driving past a shallow river.

*Sunday PUNCH* gathered that the van was stuck in between the river on Wednesday, August 17, 2022. But he returned the next day with great optimism to retrieve the van despite warnings from farmers to be cautious.

Unfortunately, due to the rain, the water increased and they got drowned with their bodies swept to Ture Betbede in Kaltungo, some miles away from the river.

Our correspondent who visited Potaba River observed the challenges faced by residents in passing the river daily at one end of the river to the other. When *Sunday PUNCH* arrived at Ibrahim's family house located at Kalaring, sadness was written on the faces of the family members.

Thirty-year-old Ibrahim's brother, Hassan Mohammed, said that the family would not remain the same considering the impact of the incident on them. He noted that the deceased was the family breadwinner.

He said, "I am sarkin aska by profession (traditional barber) in Kaltungo. Ibrahim was 45 years old. He had only one wife and our parents are still alive and live in the same house. Ibrahim's son was a 400 level Islamic Studies student. He was awaiting the Academic Staff Union of Universities to suspend the strike. He assisted my brother his father in his business."

Expressing grief, Mohammad said that his relationship with the deceased was cordial.

He added, "I was shocked on hearing the news because hours before he left he (Ibrahim) came to me and we greeted each other and he left with his vehicle to deliver firewood to the owner. I have yet to come to terms with the news. I find it difficult to accept the bad news because the deceased happened to be an elder brother in our family. The family burden was on him and myself. I must say that it has not been easy."

He urged the government to support Ibrahim's family by providing another van to enable the family to bounce back.

He added, "I call on the government to come to my rescue because I am not finding it easy to cope. I don't know where to start from. Government should help the family because the breadwinner is dead. It should provide them with a van to carry on the work he used to feed the eight children he left behind."

According to some residents, the Potaba river claims lives yearly, noting that victims usually hit their heads on the river's rocky nature.

Some residents who spoke with *Sunday PUNCH* said the situation would be solved when the government constructed a bridge across the river, advising farmers to be patient before crossing.

## Survivors bemoan occurrence

Speaking, a 30-year-old farmer in Aya-kaleh community, Ngale Beni, who witnessed the tragic occurrence, said Ibrahim was advised to abandon the vehicle, due to perceived risk of moving it out amid the raging flood.

Beni said he was on his farm when they beckoned him for assistance to help them push the vehicle out of the river. He said he obliged them but was lucky to escape unhurt.

He said, "The victims went to the bush to bring some firewood to sell in town. Some of us (farmers) warned him not to drive in with the vehicle because we know the effect but he didn't say anything to us.

"This is the only road we have linking other villages. The water gathered as a result of the rainfall because it doesn't usually get filled up like this. Some other men were trying to help the deceased push the car out of the river. The deceased usually went to a mountainous area to get firewood and the place is called Kabinyan. Even as we got help from other people and the farmers, the van still got stuck."

Beni stated that Ibrahim and three others lost their lives to the water, adding, “The water became higher than it was and it led to the sweeping of the car and other people because it was beyond control.”

Most times, survivors narrowly escape through the use of rope provided by villagers in a safe zone. He said, “They will throw a rope inside the river and if the victim catches it, it will draw him or her out and if one is unable to catch it, the water will sweep the person away.”

Another survivor, Dila Philemon, who escaped by a whisker, said that he passed out at some points.

Philemon said, “We were on our way home and the deceased asked me to help him push his vehicle out of water. In the process of helping him, rain started falling and it filled the river which swept us. I fell unconscious at the time. I was told that the vehicle somersaulted twice and that only two persons including me were saved. I know some of the people that died in the incident. “

## Communities mourn

Village Head of Aya-kaleh, Haruna Musa-Galadima, said that the incident was regrettable, adding that the residents had yet to recover from the shock of losing their loved ones.

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Musa-Galadima who was pained by the death of father and son, alongside two others, decried the unavailability of bridges to link the forest and farmland to the communities.

He added that the communities had no other route of passage to their farms. He also advised them to be patient always after rainfall for the river to reduce before passing.

He stated, “The incident has been reoccurring and we have been seeking help from the government several times. But they have yet to take action. We are hoping that this time round the government will come to our rescue and do something about it. Most of the people in the community are farmers and it is a must for us to go to our farms and because we usually pass that same route many people will not be patient enough for the water to reduce before passing. Hence, they take the risk and cross the water and in the process it will sweep them away. There’s no other road to pass except this one and whenever rain falls, one will have to wait for about six hours before crossing.”

He urged the government to construct a bridge in order to forestall future occurrence, disclosing that such incidents happened to claimed victims almost every year.

Musa-Galadima noted, “It is not just in our area that this thing happens. It occurs in places such as Dogonruwa and Awak. But ours is a major problem because there are rocks in the water so if someone is swept by the river, the person

will hit his/her head against the rocks and one may sustain injury. That is why most times if water sweeps someone to the river, before we get there, the person may have passed away.”

On his part, the paramount ruler of Kaltungo LGA, Mai Kaltungo, Saleh Mohammed, who appreciated the government’s concern especially in condoling with them over the deaths of their sons, noted that every year lives were lost over what he described as preventable incidents.

The monarch urged the government to assist them by constructing bridges over the rivers in Popandi and Banganje to forestall a future occurrence.

He said, “The position of Kaltungo is situated on hills and cliffs which makes formation of rivers possible. Our farms are located across rivers and our people must go to their farms to survive. This incident happened when the van of one of our youths got stuck in the sand while attempting to cross a river since there is no bridge. In the process they were drowned, and we lost four people in three families.

“We appeal to the state government to help us stop this yearly loss of lives and property. We are tired of burying our youths who were struggling to make ends meet.”

The Mai who prayed to God to grant the victim eternal rest, said the community was pained by the incident.

Also speaking, Special Assistant to Governor Muhammadu Yahaya on Students’ Affairs, Lakwanjang Saidu, lamented the occurrence which he described as unfortunate.

He expressed optimism that the state government would look into the remote causes of the regular loss of lives at the river, urging the people not to risk passing through the water.

Lamenting the impact of the loss on families of the victims, Saidu called for immediate response towards curbing subsequent loss.

He stated, “I wish to call on the attention of the government and I believe many people lost their lives so I trust that when the government builds a bridge in this place it will enable people to cross the place and reduce loss of lives.

“Some of the people that lost their lives are students. I’m pleading with the state government to help us to construct a link bridge to avoid the recurrence of this sad incident. I also wish to commend the government’s effort so far. It has been more than 10 years that the river has been claiming lives without a solution.”

Saidu added that there were people living across the river and carrying out trading activities behind the mountain.

He noted that the victims were buried beside the river, adding that, “their bodies were found along Ture, in (bebpede ). The bodies were discovered a day after the incident.

“My advice to the villagers who reside close to the river is that any day it is about to rain they should go back home in order not to be victims of such an incident.

“I call on the farmers too to use the same method. Whenever it rains they should wait and only attempt to cross to the other side when the water has reduced. They should also look for people who can swim around to help any person that

cannot swim. If my people obey this advice before the government intervenes, it will go a long way in reducing a reoccurrence.”

## Government intervention

The state government sent a delegation on Saturday, led by the state Deputy Governor, Dr. Manassah Jatau, to the area. The deputy governor urged the Mai Kaltungo and his subjects to accept the incident as the will of God, lamenting the death of the youth who left behind dependents.

Jatau said, “Your highness, we have always hoped to visit your chiefdom during a joyous moment, especially now that the inauguration of the mosque is around the corner. But as it is, according to divine arrangement, we have come on a sad note to condole with the Mai and the people of your chiefdom over the death of four people who drowned in the river. I enjoined us to accept this in good faith as God, our maker, knows all.”

He also promised to direct the works commissioner to end the yearly occurrence in the area through the provision of requisite infrastructure.

“Since I have been told that the drowning of people in the river is a yearly occurrence, we will direct the commissioner of works to make an assessment and advise the government on the next line of action in order to stop this menace,” Jatau promised.

In his remarks, Chairman, Kaltungo Local Government Council, Faruk Umar, appreciated the governor for sending the delegation to sympathise with them.