

panorama



Plateau, Gombe snakebite deaths soar as floods sack residents, reptiles

JAMES ABRAHAM, with agency report, writes that more cases of snakebites have been reported across the country as humans and reptiles clash in dry lands while scurrying away from devastating floods

THE correspondents of the *News Agency of Nigeria*, who visited areas prone to snakebites and the treatment centres found a sharp rise in the cases, with more deaths recorded as floods had blocked access to treatment centres.

Among those killed was the wife of the village head of Magama in Langtang South Local Government of the Plateau State.

Yes, I can confirm that there is a huge rise in snakebite cases; one of the victims was the wife of the village head of Magama.

"It is a scary situation. Snakes and humans are all running away from the floods and would usually clash in the dry lands in the struggle for space," Dr Nandul Durfa told NAN.

Durfa, Managing Director, Echitap Group, producers of Anti-Snake Venom (ASV) regretted that many lives were being lost to the menace.

The former Chief Medical Director of the University of Abuja Teaching Hospital also decried the shortage of ASV in the treatment centres.

NAN also spoke with Dr Abubakar Saidu Balla, Research Officer, Snakebite Research Hospital, Kaltungo in Gombe State, who also described the situation further.

"Because of the devastating floods, farmlands are wet, and the snakes go to higher grounds where they mix with people.

"The situation is worse in riverine areas around Borno, Adamawa, Kogi, Gombe and Bauchi.

"The floods force snakes to migrate or carry them along and deposit them in the forests, homes or over river banks.

"The situation is worsened by the fact that victims cannot go to medical centres to get attention because the roads and bridges have either been washed away or flooded.

"In the rural areas, motorcycles usually help but they cannot ride through the water now. Very often, victims reach treatment centres dead."

Balla said it had become dangerous to go to the farms, especially in Gombe.

"It is time to harvest groundnuts and maize, but going to the farm is very dangerous now because snakebites are rampant.

"Farmers cannot leave their crops in the bush, so contact with the snakes is often inevitable," he said.

Meanwhile, statistics from the hospital indicate that 1,900 victims of snake bites have been admitted since January.

According to Dr Suleiman Mohammed, its Chief Medical

Officer, 34 of the victims died.

He said that most of the victims were herders and farmers who were mostly in the bush and usually at risk.

"When the rains get to the peak, we tend to have more patients because most of the snakes are dislodged from their holes and hiding places by the waters.

"So, when there is a flood, it is linked to incidents of snakebites because the flood tends to move the snakes away from their usual habitat, and they often go to areas where humans live."

He said that six deaths had been recorded in October, with the rest spread across January to September.

Reports from Lokoja in Kogi also indicated that snake attacks had become common with people living in fear.

"We live in fear of snakes but we thank God that we have not recorded any incident of snakebite," Usman Agbaje, a resident, told NAN.

He said travellers plying the flooded Ganaja-Lokoja road had often encountered big snakes while in the boats.

Another resident, Joseph Benjamin, said that snakes had been sighted at the Army Barracks.

"A big one was seen in a room recently; we were lucky that it was killed before it could harm anyone.

"Not long ago, a little girl sighted a snake under a chair and quickly notified her parents, who later killed it," he said.

Langtang is another local government where snakebites are common.

Residents have year after year despaired over the menace of snake bites and are still in endless wait for the government to come to their aid.

A resident, Naomi Bako, who lamented the incidents of snakebites in many communities in the council area, said, "We have a health centre in Zamko, where victims of snakebites are usually taken to. No year passes without recording over 1,500 cases. This year, the trend has not changed.

"Even last week, I saw two people brought to the clinic after they suffered snakebites."

Also in Jos East Local Government Area, snakes are biting more people. The Chairman of Hunters Association in the Council Area, Atsen Daniel, confirmed the development while speaking with *The PUNCH* in Jos.

Daniel said, "What I can tell you is that we have some cases of snakebites in our communities. I don't have the number of people that are victims right now but as the chairman of the hunters' association, I know such cases are many."

He further explained that snakebites usually become more common during the rainy season compared to the hot season because the snakes move around in search of dry environments and could end up in people's homes.

According to him, "Snakes in this area easily move around, especially during this period of the rainy season. They can easily

be found in a dry place during the rainy season, and during the dry season, they prefer a cool habitat. We know that snakes can be dangerous when they bite you but in this area, we are not afraid of snakes. We hunt for them because it is a very lucrative business. If you can catch one alive, it will fetch you a huge sum of money, depending on its size. You can sell it for as much as N100,000 or even more. The problem is not how to sell it but how to catch it because we have buyers who come from outside the state to purchase them anytime we have them."

Experts on flood control

Meanwhile, a geography professor, Professor Olaniran Olajire, and the immediate past president of the Nigerian Institute of Building, Sunday Wusu, in an interview with *The PUNCH* and at an event recently, stressed the need for governments at all levels to encourage tree planting as a way of averting future flooding.

They said the incidence of flooding in most parts of the country was partly a result of climate change and human factors but noted that effective climate action needed to be encouraged.

The floods, which have already put 2.5 million Nigerians including 1.5 million children at risk according to the United Nations Children's Fund, have led to the deaths of over 600 persons and the displacement of about 1.4 million persons.

Speaking on the issue, Olajire, in a telephone interview with our correspondent, said the whole world was experiencing climate change, and that one of the effects was extreme weather events, manifesting in the form of excessive precipitation and high temperatures. He noted that human beings have also worsened the situation.

He stated, "There is the element of nature and then human factors that are creating our present scenario. One of the solutions is to create detention dams to contain the excess water and enable the control of water into the farmlands, as in the case of Kogi State.

"Also, we have to dredge our major rivers, widen them, and make the valley deeper so that they can contain more water. This was done in the Ogunpa Valley in Ibadan, Oyo State."

Also, Wusu, speaking in Lagos at the 31st Lagos builders' conference and annual general meeting on Friday, said the government must discourage deforestation and encourage forestation and modern waste management.

He added, "When the ground is void and erosion comes, everything will be carried away. It is hard for you to see a forest where erosion happens because there is vegetation there to hold together the soil.

He said, by global standards, some places were meant to be reserved to receive flood water because rivers tend to overflow their banks during the rainy season.