

interview

How my sister, brother died in Jos transformer explosion – Sibling

Mrs Mary Asibi-Gonsum, the sister of a civil servant and a teacher who were electrocuted when a transformer belonging to the Jos Electricity Distribution Company exploded in Gada Bui community, Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State, resulting in the death of no fewer than six residents on October 14, 2023, shares her grief with JAMES ABRAHAM

Can you confirm your relationship with any of the residents killed in the explosion that occurred in the Gada Bui community in the Jos North Local Government Area of the state last Saturday?

My name is Dame Mary Asibi-Gonsum. I'm the National President of the Catholic Women Organisation, Nigeria. I live in Jos, Plateau State. Yes, it is very true. I lost my elder sister, Naomi David, who was an employee of the Plateau State Government. She left behind a daughter. I also lost my younger brother, Abraham David, who was a teacher at Government Secondary School, Kabong, within the community. He was married with three kids. His first child is eight years old; the second is four and the third is just four months old and his wife is a full-time housewife, though a graduate. Abraham was the seventh child of my mother, who is alive.

Did anyone explain to you how they died?

I travelled and was called in the early hours of that Saturday, at about 3:15 am, and informed about the unfortunate incident. I was told that there was a high-tension wire which snapped and then fell on the low-tension cable which supplied the houses in the area with abnormal current. I was told that along the line, people were alerted and everyone started switching off their electrical appliances in their homes. So, Naomi who was in her home also woke up and went to wake others up to put off all their appliances which they did. Abraham's kitchen was outside the main building, so he noticed that the deep freezer in the kitchen was on. So, he opened the kitchen, and unlocked the burglary proof; usually, they don't close the inner door for ventilation. So, he was able to see that the deep freezer was on and was making a very funny sound. So, he opened the door and went in to switch off the deep freezer. Unknown to him, the high current from the fallen high-tension wire had already spread to the deep freezer and that's how he was stuck to the deep freezer. He started shouting as he tried to free himself. It was his scream that jolted everyone.

Did he get help?

When Naomi, his elder sister heard him screaming, she turned and saw him. She just rushed to help out and got electrocuted. So, that was what I was told, and at that time, his elder brother who works with an electricity company was contacted and when he came, he tried to disconnect them from the current but he couldn't, despite the measures he applied; he used hand gloves and then his boots but the current was so much that he felt an electric shock through his gloves and the wood tried to use to disconnect my siblings.

What did he and others who were present do next?

He had no choice but to just leave everything. That was how they all stood with arms folded and hands on their heads as my brother and sister screamed to death. So, that is the story I was told by one of my brothers. He was there with them when Abraham and Naomi died in that tragic manner. He is traumatised; he was recently discharged from

the hospital yesterday after several days in the hospital because he fainted that day. After the whole thing, the corpses of my siblings were moved to a hospital. My brother who fainted was even the one consoling people but when he got back home, suddenly, he couldn't bear it anymore. After he was discharged the first time and returned home, he started recalling the whole incident in his mind and suddenly collapsed again because of the trauma and was rushed to the hospital; he was just discharged yesterday (Thursday). But we give God the glory; he has stabilised.

How old were your late siblings?

Naomi was about 60 years old while Abraham was 29.

What was your immediate reaction when you learnt about that incident?

I was really devastated and shocked. I couldn't figure out what could be responsible for that. And I kept thinking whether it was right to pass such a cable over homes. I had so many questions in my mind, but I just gave God the glory for whatever happened and I thank Him for that because he knows it all. He knows the reason why he allowed that to happen. If He had wanted, He would have stopped it because for some other persons in the community, when the high current came, the cable supplying their houses got cut off and the current didn't pass through. However, for others, the current spread everywhere and electrocuted them in their homes. In fact, I couldn't just explain the whole thing because so many people who came around to pay us condolences narrated their own experiences because some other people, apart from my two siblings, died as a result of the incident.

Can you remember what any of them said?

One of the ladies who died was sleeping on her bed and her body just touched the wall and she got electrocuted. Another person who narrated her experience said when she saw that the current was high in her room and everywhere, she tried coming down from her bed but could not. So, she and others in the house started jumping in the room and then jumped on the bed and stood on the bed while some others stood on their chairs and that was how they were able to escape the death.

Some of the neighbours who escaped in the

community came around to sympathise with us and then to let us know that it was the will of God because going by their own experience if the ground was electrified and they were able to survive, it meant it was not their time (to die).

For example, a relative of one of the deceased said he (the deceased) was about to remove his phone from where it was connected to charge the battery when he was electrocuted. Meanwhile, another woman said though she struggled to unplug her phone, she removed it and nothing happened to her. Another person who came to console us also recounted his experience saying that the high current flung him out of his apartment and he hit his head on a wall but miraculously survived. So, I want to accept what happened as the will of God. My prayer is that God in His infinite mercy will make His purpose known to us so that we can make amends and that God will bring a turnaround in the community. To Him be the glory, honour and adoration.

You said Naomi rushed to save Abraham when he got stuck to the appliance. What kind of person was she?

Honestly, for Naomi, whoever knows her knows she could take a bullet for another person whether she knows them or not. She was that kind of a person, very caring and sympathetic. She was a mother indeed and a true sister. I don't know how to go about this burden her death has left for me. At any point in time, if anything happened in the family, Naomi was always there to represent the family. She made sure that the family was represented. I am a busy person and anytime I had an event in my house, like ceremonies, and I called her for assistance, she did not hesitate to come to my house. Sometimes, she ran errands for me like stopping by at the market to help me buy some items. When anybody was sick in the family, it was Naomi who took them to a hospital. She stood by their sides praying and begging for God's healing upon them. Naomi has run her race. She fought her own battle. I believe she is resting in the bosom of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Let no man take glory for what happened but to God be the glory, honour and adoration.

Abraham was a brother indeed and a disciplinarian, though Naomi was also a disciplinarian because she never overlooked wrongdoing but made sure she corrected anyone who erred, even to the point of quarrelling. That was who she was. Abraham's

pupils who have been devastated by his sudden death have also been testifying of his goodness. Two days back, when they visited, one could see the way they expressed their pain over the incident as if it just took place. From the school principal to the youngest pupil, every one of them wept. Some also fainted; at least, three of the pupils who were very close to Abraham were rushed to a hospital. They said he was like a father to them. My brother was the type who got reports from some parents when their children misbehaved. All his colleagues and friends knew him for that. He was very committed and dedicated to his job. I think some of his friends who didn't know about his death were busy calling him to come to work because there was some compilation of results that they needed to do. When they became aware that he was dead, they rushed the house weeping and throwing themselves on the ground. He really impacted them so much that they will never forget him in a hurry.

When was the last time you interacted with your siblings before their tragic death?

Naomi was in my house before I travelled to Benin (in Edo State). When I arrived in Abuja and I returned to Jos by road, Naomi called me on the phone when I got to Alkwasila to know where I was and whether I was alright. She was just recovering from an illness and had not even resumed work. She told me she would like to resume on Thursday and I advised her to resume on Monday. She came to my house and I asked her what she would like to take home because I had some fresh fish in the refrigerator. She jokingly said, "If I come to your house and I don't take fresh fish, what have I gained?" We laughed. Later, she told me that she would like us to mark our father's 10th-year remembrance. I advised her to let us mark it at Christmas so that our other siblings would be around, and she agreed.

What steps are you and your surviving siblings planning to take about the incident?

The truth is, going by what had happened already, to an extent I will say, the electricity company should be held responsible. Why? It is because I remember when we were growing up, transformers used to have circuit breakers that cut off the supply of electricity whenever there was a breach or power surge. But in this case, even the transformer got burnt yet the current passed through it. I know of seven other persons who died in the incident. One of the survivors later told me that the number of deaths later increased to 12 because some of them who sustained injuries and were rushed to the hospital later could not make it.

The Jos Electricity Distribution Company condoled with the families of the victims. Do you think the electricity company should have been aware of the power surge before it resulted in the loss of lives?

In the transmission section, at least when there is a breach like that, it was supposed to have seen the signal. I remember back when I was very young and visited a place like the defunct National Electric Power Authority on an excursion, we were shown equipment that allowed the workers to know when there was a problem. Is it that they (Jos Disco) didn't see it? Or is the equipment dilapidated? I don't know and cannot say, but I pleaded with them when they came to commiserate with us to see what they could do to put all their electrical installations in order. If not for God, if this thing (explosion) had happened in the evening, honestly, the loss of lives and destruction would have been massive because of the population in the community.

Also, imagine if it had rained that day. Oh my God! It would have been something else; it would have been more disastrous. But as God would have it, it happened in the early hours when almost everybody was in their homes. So the electricity company should be held responsible for their carelessness and I told one of the officials of the company that day to go round and see how their wires crisscrossed in the community. I don't know what must have happened. So, they should do the needful.



•Mary



•Abraham



•Naomi