

# Customs didn't cause rice buyers' deaths at Lagos office – Spokesperson

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| By Gbenga Oloniran

The Nigeria Customs Service has described as unfortunate the stampede at its office in Yaba, Lagos, during the sale of 25kg bags of rice to Lagos residents that led to the death of some seven persons.

Our correspondent learnt that people were trampled to death as a mass of people thronged the venue of the sale of the bags of confiscated rice at the Yaba office of the service on Friday amid the harsh economic conditions in the country.

*PUNCH Metro* reports that a member of the All Progressives Congress, Comfort Adebajo, and six others lost their lives in the bid to purchase the rice which sold for N10,000 at the Yaba Customs office.

The coordinator of FKL Ward E1, Lagos State of the APC, Oluwafemi Fadahunsi, and Secretary, Adebari Adewale, confirmed that Adebajo was one of the seven persons who died during the stampede.

In the obituary released on Saturday obtained by *PUNCH Online*, the party wrote, “It is with heavy hearts and regret we announce the painful death of one of our members in FKL Ward E1, Mrs Adebajo Comfort Funmilayo, of house number 104, Ibidun Street by Akinhanmi Street, Ojuelegba.

“She was among the seven victims who died in the course of buying Customs rice at Yaba.

“May God grant all the members of her family and all the residents of Ward E1 the fortitude to bear the irreplaceable loss.”

But the Lagos APC Publicity Secretary, Seye Oladejo, told our correspondent that he could not confirm the report involving the member yet. “I also saw it in the news. I will try and reach out to the local government concerned. I’m not in a position to speak authoritatively about that because I also saw it in the news and I want to hear from our people over there before being categorical about it. Once I get the facts of the incident, I’ll let you know,” Oladejo told *PUNCH Metro* on Sunday.

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Speaking with our correspondent on Sunday, the spokesperson for the Customs, Abdullahi Maiwada, blamed the development on impatience on the part of the people who came for the event.

“At a point, they decided to be impatient. When we saw the crowd, we even suspended the collection of forms and said, ‘Let’s give them free’. We did that, we exhausted everything. After exhausting everything and we told them everything had finished, and that they could go, that we didn’t have any more, they persisted. Some of them broke the fence of that place. We had to put some barricades to cover the area. Some of them went and entered the container. At a point, we used our ambulance, and took them to hospital,” he said.

He added, “I don’t really have the statistics of the lives we have lost, but we made every effort for everyone to be orderly and to rescue them. We took them to hospital. What do you want us to do?”

He said the Customs made use of Yaba because it had formerly demolished the place, saying, “The reason we used Yaba was because we didn’t want to endanger our facilities.”

When asked if the deaths resulted from pushing, he answered, “I can’t say. Some of them went and entered the engine container. Did we cause the death of anybody? We didn’t. We made efforts to rescue them because we took them to hospital. We have learnt our lessons. We have to go and re-strategise on how we’re going to continue and sustain this initiative.”

“It is very unfortunate, it is something that we wished did not happen and we are very pathetic about it. We are with them in this trying situation,” he told the victims’ families.

He said further, “I can neither confirm nor deny the number (of deaths). I don’t have that data now, but that people are saying seven. It’s not true, it’s not up to that number but even if it’s one, yes, it’s life. But these are the circumstances that led to what happened, they were avoidable.”

Last week, a protest broke out in Ibadan, Oyo State capital, against economic hardship. In Lagos, Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu rolled out measures to cushion the suffering being faced by people including announcing three days of work at the office for civil servants. The government also plans to set up feeding centres.