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Rising boat accidents fuel stricter waterway regulation calls

In this piece, ANOZIE EGOLE looks at how to tackle the rising boat mishaps in the country's waterways

MR Bola Oyebamiji's appointment as the managing director of the National Inland Waterways Authority on October 25, 2023, succeeding Dr George Muoghalu, was a long-awaited change for many maritime stakeholders.

However, 11 months later, stakeholders believed that the inland waterways has not improved due to the level of insecurity and boat mishaps that had occurred on the nation's waterways.

The PUNCH's findings have shown that in the last eight months, the country has recorded 116 deaths on the inland waterways.

According to data by the Marine Crafts Builders Association of Nigeria released early this year, Nigeria recorded 3,130 incidents of boat mishaps on its waters in the last 10 years.

Also, the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport Nigeria Investigative Committee on boat accidents on Nigeria's coastal and inland waterways, revealed that over 300 lives were lost to different boat accidents across the country in 2023.

Many stakeholders had attributed those mishaps to overloading, poorly maintained crafts, engine failures, and a lack of safety equipment.

On the strength of those recurring tragedies, boat users had accused the NIWA leadership of inaction, describing the agency as being asleep.



• Oyebamiji

The bodies of three more crew members were recovered days later, further fuelling public outrage and improving regulation of the country's waterways.

As Nigerians prepared to celebrate the 64th Independence anniversary, the sleepy Gbajibo community in Mokwa Local Government Area, Niger State, was plunged into mourning.

A wooden boat conveying over 300 people, mainly women and children, from Mundi Local Government Area in Kwara State to Mokwa LGA, for the Malud celebration, capsized.

NIWA's interventions

NIWA has taken some steps towards ensuring that these incidents are reduced to the barest minimum through sensitisation and other programmes.

Some arrests have been made by the agency in the past, and some have been prosecuted even though the ugly incident keeps happening.

However, in a bid to further stop the menace, the agency recently launched a transportation code for waterways users and vowed to punish offenders.

The PUNCH reports that the NIWA has commenced a sensitisation and enforcement drive to ensure full compliance with the waterways transportation code in Lagos jetties.

The agency said that the move was aimed at improving safety and regulation on the state's waterways.

Speaking during a sensitisation exercise in Lagos recently, the Lagos Area Manager of NIWA, Sarat Braimah, stated that the agency would ensure that boat captains, operators, and passengers were fully aware of the new safety measures and the strict penalties for non-compliance.

She explained that the code, which had been officially gazetted into law, was designed to address critical safety concerns across Lagos' waterways.

She emphasised the importance of making all waterway users aware of the new regulations.

According to Braimah, the sensitisation campaign focuses on communicating the major aspects of the code, which include mandatory registration of vessels, the ban on overloading of boats, and the compulsory use of life jackets for all passengers.

The NIWA Lagos boss explained that those provisions, which were previously issued as advisory warnings, were now enforceable by law, warning that enforcement would be strict, with violators facing severe consequences.

NIWA could enhance its operations through regular safety awareness campaigns and closer collaboration with local governments, community leaders, and safety volunteers at loading bays

"The timing of the enforcement is particularly significant as it coincides with the 'ember months', a period of increased waterway traffic due to seasonal festivities," Braimah said.

She added that they would be deploying 72 naval personnel to man the jetties to ensure compliance.

Stakeholders speak

Stakeholders, especially boat users across the country, have expressed outrage over the incessant boat mishaps that have claimed many lives in the last year.

The stakeholders cited the lack of life jackets, poor state of the boats, and inadequate safety measures as major contributing factors.

Reacting to the numerous boat accidents on the country's waters, the immediate past Chairman of the United Waterways Passengers Association, Mr Pius Agbude, told *The PUNCH* that after winning absolute control of the waterways at the Supreme Court, NIWA had failed to deliver.

"We don't even know what he is doing yet, even after winning absolute control over waterways through the Supreme Court. NIWA is too docile," he said.

The Chairman of the United Waterways Passengers Association, Mr Gbenga Oluwadiya, while admitting that boat accidents happen mostly when a boat runs into a wreck, also called in the need for passengers to be properly kitted.

"I think last year ended, and earlier this year, we have had a series of boat mishaps, which I will say is normal because accidents happen everywhere.

"It happens mostly when boats run into wrecks. In all these, if our people are properly kitted, it would have reduced the fatality of the accidents," he said.

According to Oluwadiya, despite the boat mishaps, waterway transportation was safer than the road.

"I still consider the waterways safer than the road. What we are doing is sensitising our members on the need to wear their life jackets properly. You know some people will hang out on their neck, and when something happens, the jacket will be off their body. "So, what we are doing is sensitising them, the government is doing its own, and the regulators are doing their own. And as passengers, we are always encouraging them to do the right thing. Another thing is the phobia of water," he explained.

He advised passengers to wear their life jackets properly and jump into the water when a boat is distressed.

"When a boat is distressed, the best place for you to be is on the water; fasten your life jacket, and jump into the water. But some people, because of the water phobia, will remain in the boat, and the pressure of the water will take them and the boat down the bottom of the lagoon," Oluwadiya noted.

He believed that government agencies could do better in securing lives and properties on the waterways.

"You know there is always room for improvement, and then in every government organisation, they have their challenges. Funding is one and training is another one. And the equipment they will require is another.

"So, we can't judge NIWA; we can only judge people by the amount of resources they have in their hands. So, they may probably be constrained. You can't judge them by the fact that they are there; what if they don't have resources?

"I believe NIWA can do better. The question is, do they have all the support to work well? I don't want to say they have failed but I believe they can do better," he stated.

Stakeholders have also lamented the rising insecurity on Nigeria's waterways.

The PUNCH reports that on September 2, 10 maritime workers were abducted by suspected kidnappers in Bonny River Waters, sparking widespread fear among the workers' union and their families.

The Chairman of the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria, River Commercial District, Mr Isreal Pepple, told *The PUNCH* recently that the abducted workers had been released.

"Yes, they have been released; 10 of them have been released. On the issue of ransom, that is the one I don't know if they were rescued. It would have been in the papers, and if they were not rescued, you should know," Pepple confirmed.

On his part, the President of the Nigeria Association of Masters Mariners, Capt. Tajudeen Alao, in a recent interview, acknowledged that NIWA was tasked with managing navigable rivers in no fewer than 28 states, which placed enormous responsibilities on its leadership.

"Marine transportation is different from land transportation, and the geographical coverage is wider. Many communities are located in remote areas, and reaching them is often challenging, but this doesn't excuse the high number of deaths we have seen," Alao said.

He noted that NIWA had fared well in some areas, but emphasised that there was significant room for improvement.

He suggested that NIWA could enhance its operations through regular safety awareness campaigns and closer collaboration with local governments, community leaders, and safety volunteers at loading bays.

Boat accidents

Our correspondent gathered that on October 2, 2023, a boat carrying 34 passengers capsized in the Yauri axis of the River Niger, near the Agwara Local Government Council of Niger State. The boat was en route to Yauri Market when the tragedy occurred just a few meters from its destination. Four bodies were recovered from the river, while several others were declared missing. The bodies were never seen.

On October 7, 2023, a boat carrying women and children fleeing flood in Ogburn Local Government Council of Anambra State, capsized, killing 76 passengers.

The majority of the victims were mothers and children, who were trying to escape their flooded communities.

According to survivors, the boat driver lost control after sailing into heavy waves, causing the vessel to collide with a bridge support.

The number of lives lost in this accident left the nation in shock, with many questioning the effectiveness of NIWA's safety oversight.

On October 26, 2023, two bodies were recovered after a boat crossing from Olorunsogo to the Isawo area of Lagos capsized. Four passengers were rescued alive.

Just two days later, there was another boat mishap in the Karim Lamido area of Taraba State, which claimed the lives of more than 20 people.

These tragic incidents once again highlighted the dangers of travelling on Nigeria's poorly regulated waterways.

Also on November 6, 2023, four residents of Nasarawa State drowned when a boat carrying rice farmers capsized in Awe LGA. The passengers were returning from their farms when the accident occurred, and despite efforts by local divers to save them, their bodies were recovered hours later.

It was only six days before another tragedy struck, as eight people died in a boat mishap in the Ibi LGA of Taraba State. The cause of the accident was linked to engine failure and rough waters.

While Nigerians were trying to recover from the Ibi incident, on December 11, another boat accident occurred in Gamadio LGA of Adamawa State, where two people went missing, while three others were rescued.

The search for the missing persons continued for days, but their bodies were never recovered.

It took just 10 days into 2024 before the country was greeted with another boat mishap. On January 10, 2024, 11 people, including children, lost their lives in a boat mishap along the Andoni-Bonny coastal waters in Rivers State.

The accident involved two passenger boats plying the route, and it was later revealed that neither of the boats was equipped with life jackets for passengers.

February 2024 witnessed a series of accidents that once again underscored the lack of safety measures on Nigeria's waterways.

On February 21, an Ibeshe-bound ferry collided with a submerged concrete structure near the Lekki-Ikoyi Link Bridge in Lagos, leaving one person dead.

Less than a week later, on February 26, a 20-passenger boat capsized in the Ibeshe/Ikorodu area, killing three passengers.

Despite the intervention of local boat operators and rescue teams, the accident reignited concerns about the poor regulation of boat operations in Lagos State.

In April, a boat carrying a Nollywood film crew capsized in Anambra State, resulting in multiple casualties.

Among the victims was Junior Pope Odonwodo, a well-known actor.