

panorama

After 400 deaths, FG jerks to life, plans awareness campaigns on tanker explosions

A recent fuel tanker explosion in Suleja, Niger State, reignited concerns over the recurring tragedies caused by fuel scooping in Nigeria. With over 98 lives lost in the latest incident, and almost 400 deaths in four years, the disaster highlights the deadly risks of poverty-driven desperation and systemic failures. **GIFT HABIB** examines the factors fueling these preventable tragedies and the urgent need for action to end them

FUEL tanker accidents, often attributed to poor road conditions, reckless driving, and insufficient vehicle maintenance, have claimed hundreds of lives in recent years.

When a tanker overturns, it creates chaos as individuals rush to the scene to collect the spilt fuel. Many see it as an opportunity to secure a valuable resource that is increasingly out of reach due to rising prices and erratic supply.

The risks, however, are immense. What begins as a frantic rush for free fuel often ends in tragedy; a devastating explosion that claims dozens of lives.

A single spark triggered by static electricity, a lit cigarette, or a dropped phone can ignite an explosion, turning the scene into a deadly inferno. This dangerous practice, rooted in poverty, desperation, and a lack of public awareness, has turned the collection of spilt fuel into a gamble with death.

In recent years, the practice of fuel scooping has claimed hundreds of lives, turning tanker accidents into national crises. The phenomenon exposes deeper systemic issues in road safety, emergency response, and governance in Nigeria.

Fuel tanker explosions have become an alarming and recurring phenomenon across Nigeria. In the past four years alone, over 400 lives have been lost to the tragedy across Nigeria, according to media reports. The incidents span urban and rural areas, affecting communities across the country.

On January 18, 2025, a tanker overturned in Dikko near Suleja, Niger State, spilling its contents. Crowds quickly gathered to scoop the fuel, but a subsequent explosion killed more than 98 people. The victims included men, women, and children, most of whom had rushed to the scene to secure the valuable resource.

Earlier, on January 6, 2025, four people were killed when a petrol tanker exploded in Delta State. A few months earlier, in October 2024, a tragedy struck in Jigawa State, where over 144 people lost their lives while scooping fuel from an overturned tanker. The explosion caused widespread destruction and left families mourning loved ones.

On September 8, 2024, in Agaie, Niger State, about 48 persons lost their lives. On December 22, 2023, two people were killed in an Ebonyi fuel tanker explosion. On July 3, 2023, a spark from a phone ignited a fire at an accident site in Ondo State, where people had gathered to scoop fuel. The inferno claimed 20 lives.

On April 28, 2023, the Plateau State Police Command confirmed that 13 persons lost their lives in a tanker explosion in Jos North Local Government Area.

On November 10, 2022, a gasoline tanker crashed and then exploded in Kogi State, killing at least 12 people. On October 20, 2022, 10 people were confirmed dead in a tanker explosion which occurred at Araromi town, near the Sagamu Interchange on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, while on February 18, 2022, the Federal Road Safety Corps confirmed that no fewer than 17 persons were burnt to death as a tanker caught fire on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway in Ogun State.

The frequent occurrence of fuel tanker explosions is rooted in a mix of economic, infrastructural, and governance challenges. The high cost of fuel, combined with erratic supply, makes it a valuable commodity. In impoverished communities, the risk of collecting fuel from a fallen tanker is often outweighed by the potential reward.

Nigeria's roads are notorious for their poor condition. Potholes, uneven surfaces, and narrow lanes contribute to frequent accidents involving heavy vehicles. Tanker drivers navigating these roads face significant challenges, increasing the likelihood of accidents.



• Fuel tanker explosion scene

There is also the inadequate enforcement of safety standards for tankers and drivers, thus exacerbating the problem. Many tankers lack proper safety features, such as valves that prevent fuel leakage during accidents. Additionally, drivers are often poorly trained and overworked, leading to fatigue and reckless driving.

When tanker accidents occur, emergency responders often arrive too late to secure the scene. In many cases, residents reach the site first, bypassing any attempts to cordon off the area. This lack of crowd control and rapid intervention contributes to the high casualty rates.

Speaking at the explosion scene in Niger, the Minister of Information and National Orientation, Mohammed Idris, said, "Because in the last couple of months, from September 2024 to this time, we have had four of these major incidents. We had the first one between Ibadan and Ife, where a tanker exploded. Five houses, cars and other vehicles were touched, and they were involved in the fire."

"Almost a day after, here in Niger State, again, in Agaie, about 48 persons lost their lives. This was on the 8th of September, 2024. Not long afterwards, on the 15th of October, again in 2024, about 144 people lost their lives in Jigawa State in a similar incident."

"And now, only yesterday, here at Dikko Junction, within this emirate, nearly 80 people have lost their lives. Now, if you put that together, you will see that over 265 people have so far lost their lives in this kind of incident, and this is really very worrying," Idris said.

The recurring tragedies have drawn widespread condemnation from stakeholders, who have called for urgent action to address the root causes.

Human rights lawyer, Femi Palana, criticised security agencies

for their failure to prevent the Suleja explosion. He argued that a more proactive approach could have saved lives.

The Chairman of the Southern Governors' Forum, Dapo Abiodun, described the incidents as a "devastating tragedy" and called for increased public awareness campaigns to discourage the practice of scooping fuel.

The Chairman of the Northern Senators Forum, Abdulaziz Yar'Adua, urged the FRSC to enforce stricter safety regulations for tankers and heavy-duty vehicles.

Experts like the Registrar of the Professional Driving and Safety Academy, Jide Owatunnise, stated the need for improved driver training and better road infrastructure.

"Without any iota of doubt, the problems being caused by articulated vehicles are so numerous and damaging that the inadequate and inappropriate responses of the government and agencies are becoming more worrisome than ever before."

"The government should map out the trailer routes and ensure they are reconstructed for their use. Articulated vehicles should be restricted to only the roads constructed to accommodate them in terms of strength and other requirements."

"Lastly, I want to emphasise the need to properly and more effectively train all articulated vehicle drivers, particularly in the areas of vehicle characteristics, vehicle limits, braking system, suspension system and vehicle dynamics (the forces that operate on vehicles in motion). In addition, the employers of articulated vehicle drivers must deeply understand fatigue management and the chronic fatigue syndrome as well as the compromised use of the driver diary strategy for fatigue management," he warned.

The Federal Government has pledged to address the issue comprehensively. Following the Suleja explosion, Idris said President Bola Tinubu has constituted a high-powered committee to investigate the root causes of tanker explosions and recommend solutions.

The committee includes representatives from the Ministry of Information, the National Emergency Management Agency, the Federal Road Safety Corps and other key stakeholders.

"The President is really saddened by what has happened and he is worried to the extent that he has said that a high-powered committee is set up to look at these incidents," Idris said during his visit to Niger State.

Idris condemned the practice of individuals endangering their lives by attempting to scoop fuel from accident tankers, emphasising that such actions are unacceptable to the government.

Continued on www.punchng.com

6
The practice of fuel scooping, rooted in poverty, desperation, and a lack of public awareness, has turned the collection of spilt fuel into a gamble with death