

Grief as JEDC power surge kills student, destroys properties

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| By James Abraham

While electricity supply is crucial in the daily lives of Nigerians, especially owing to its socio-economic benefits, its presence is usually heralded with joy in many homes, families, and communities whenever supply is restored.

Regrettably, the residents of Rukuba Road Community in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State would rather wish it was a different scenario, following the sad incident that occurred last Sunday.

Power
Arewa PUNCH's investigations in the community revealed that the electricity power supply by the Jos Electricity Distribution Company had been absent for a long while but by the time electricity was finally restored to the area after the people had suffered severe loss in terms of grounded socio-economic activities, rather than be a source of jubilation and blessing, it came as a merchant of death and destructions.

This manifested in the form of a power surge which started around 11 am and was only brought under control a few minutes later, but not after one resident had been confirmed dead instantly and several properties worth millions of naira destroyed.

Our correspondent learnt that several persons sustained various injuries from electrical shocks and were rushed to the hospitals for treatment.

When our correspondent visited the community on Wednesday, some half-collapsed electricity poles with burnt meters and severed wires hanging on them littered the areas.

Several other poles that were left unattended after the incident were also seen menacingly threatening to fall by the roadside.

As a result of their near collapse state, not a few residents have expressed fears and serious apprehensions that they may fall on moving vehicles and pedestrians going about their normal duties.

Though many of the affected residents were still trying to salvage whatever remains from their burnt properties in their homes, a resident who volunteered to speak with Arewa PUNCH, Mrs Joy Okpara Uba, described the situation as pathetic.

“What happened to us in this community is pathetic,” Mrs Okpara-Uba, who lost her big deep freezer and other electrical appliances as a result of the power surge bemoaned the situation.

She added, “Yesterday, I couldn’t go to work. If you enter my room now, the whole place has turned black due to the thick smoke that engulfed the entire rooms. I had to stay awake throughout yesterday trying to clean the house.

“Even a wake keep that I was supposed to attend, I couldn’t go. I’m still speechless about what happened, but I thank God that I’m alive.

“I lost all my electrical appliances. They were burnt. The house almost caught fire, but it was the help of neighbours who came with all manner of things to put out the sparks of flames. These were part of the efforts put in that eventually saved the situation.”

Recounting how she escaped being electrocuted, 38-year-old Madam Ether Eche said, “As at Saturday, due to the heavy rainfall, we did not have light through out the day. So on Sunday, JEDC restored the light around 11 am and everyone was excited that light had been restored. At least, it would enable us to charge our phone batteries.

“But before I could reach out to plug my phone, most of the electrical devices started sparking and I tried to switch off the extension but before I could reach out to the control box, I discovered that it was already engulfed in a fire. So, we ran outside and started calling for our neighbours’ help.

“That was when we discovered that many electrical poles were also on fire and some meters in other peoples’ houses were also already on fire.

“Helpless and lost on what to do, but we were determined not to get consumed by the sparks of fireworks, we just started doing all manner of mass disconnection just to make sure that the fire did not spread to more peoples’ houses.

Luckily for us, not everything got burnt as we were able to salvage some of them.”

For 32-year-old, Shade, the story took a rather different dimension as she was not so lucky as her mother, who was inside the house resting was trapped by the electrical surge and was rushed to the hospital almost dead.

Narrating how the incident happened, Shade, who had been shuttling between the Bingham University Teaching Hospital where her mother was rushed to explained: “On Sunday, after the church service, my mother was inside the house. As I was about entering the house, somebody shouted that the electric lights were sparking all over. Out of panic, people started running in different directions trying to bring their children out from their homes while others attempted to salvage one or two household appliances or other very useful items from their houses because we thought the whole community was on fire.

“It was at that moment that somebody told me that my mother was inside the house. After struggling to enter into the house, I saw her already trapped by the power surge on top of the electric stabiliser. I shouted and called for help, and within minutes, she was pulled out. I thought she was already dead because she could not move. We rushed her to the hospital. We thank God that she is now at the Bingham University Teaching Hospital receiving some treatment.”

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Arewa PUNCH reports that the most pathetic case was that of Madam Jonathan, who lost her 19-year-old undergraduate son, Edison, to the power surge.

It was learnt that Edison, who just got admission into the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University in Bauchi, was billed to return to school on Friday before his untimely death.

His distraught mother could not hold back tears as she narrated the incident to our correspondent, who visited to condole with her.

According to the grieving mother, “I was not in the house when the whole thing started,” she began, “but my sister who was around called me on phone and asked me to call an electrician to come to the house because every electrical outlet was just sparking.”

She continued: “I said okay, that I would call the electrician but that she should first of all switch off all appliances before he comes. After a while, I called her again to ask if she had done as instructed, and she said ‘yes’ but that the fire was not being controlled anymore.

“I now ordered her to vacate the house with others inside and immediately called other neighbours to assist with the situation. I could hear her telling everyone to leave the house immediately, and the next thing I heard was her shout that my son had been thrown to the floor and had suffered electrocuted. Even when neighbours came and cut the control switch, he was still stuck on the ground.

“But before they could do any other thing, they discovered that he was not making any movements again, and that was how he died.

“He just got admission into 100 level at ATBU Bauchi. He was just 19 years old, and he was supposed to return to school this Friday. His death is very painful.”

Such were the experiences of the residents affected by the power surge even as the community has again been plunged in darkness since the incident.

When contacted, the Communication Manager of the Jos Electricity Distribution Company, Saratu Aliyu, could not be reached as several calls put across to her mobile phone went unanswered.

Meanwhile, the Plateau State government has expressed concern over the power surge incident that wrecked havoc in the community.

In an interview with our correspondent, the state Commissioner for Lands, Survey and Town Planning, Peter Nyam Gai said he had led a team of government officials to the community for on-the-spot assessment of the situation based on the directive of Governor Barrister Caleb Mutfwang following reports of the incident.

While assessing the disaster, the Commissioner who personally visited many of the victims in their homes described the impact of the power surge in Rukuba Road community as huge, but assured that the government would intervene in the situation to avoid a reoccurrence.

He commiserated with the victims over the incident and assured them that the government would do everything possible to ensure that everyone affected by the power surge disaster gets justice and support.

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A visibly shaken Gai retorted, “Honestly, this is an unfortunate incident that we never bargained for. It’s so unfortunate that people lost their properties. Specifically, in one house, we saw the grave of a young man, Funom being dug. This was a boy who was full of life in the university, but today is no more. Indeed, it is painful.

“So, His Excellency, the Executive Governor asked me to go there and assess the situation and also offer his condolences, which we have just done. We have assessed the situation, and I can assure you we will try and pursue justice for the residents who lost their properties and also the family of Funom who lost their son.

“Certainly, the government will be alive to its responsibilities. So, apart from identifying with the people, we will also ensure that they get justice,” he assured all who were present.

On what should be done to the JEDC regarding the situation, the Commissioner said, “I remember that a similar thing happened in my community in Kabong, and sincerely, we would like to say that JEDC showed maturity and I expect them also to show maturity in this case in Rukuba Road community by compensating the people affected and also paying compensation to the young man that lost his life even though no compensation is enough to exchange for any life lost. So, I also want to advise JEDC to replace some of their outdated equipment and also do an audit of some of their wires to see if they can pass the integrity test to be able to avoid an unfortunate situation like this in future.

“I also want to say that as citizens, we must also be alive in our response to emergencies and also ensure that once something like this happens, we should rush outside... I mean, we should immediately vacate the environment because electric shock is very faral that people hardly survive. We must equally warn our people against illegal connection of electricity and tampering with PHCN equipment must be discouraged, even though we must ensure that we assist JEDC by protecting their equipment against vandalism”

Our correspondent reports that as the Rukuba Road community mourns the loss of young Edison and others affected by the power surge, it is clear that a lot needs to be done to ensure the safety and reliability of the power distribution infrastructure in the state.