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Lekki building tragedy: How our brothers, friends died, by victims' relations

— 9th March 2016

*I don't know how to tell our parents that Jamiu is no more'

•Woman, baby, 16 others killed, 13 rescued, many still trapped

By Tessy Igomu and Job Osazuwa

A woman with a baby strapped to her back and 16 other persons were killed when a five-storey building collapsed in the Lekki area of Lagos in the early hours of Tuesday.

The baby was one-month old.

An eye-witness, who gave his name as Michael, said sympathisers, who got to the scene early in the morning heard the cries of a baby and the mother calling for help. They said the voices were no longer heard around 12 noon.

Thirteen persons were rescued alive from the site, even as many others were presumed trapped in the rubble. The collapsed building, which was still under construction, was located at Lekki Gardens, Horizon One, close to Chisco Bus Stop, Lekki.

Those rescued had varying degrees of injuries and are presently receiving treatment in various government hospitals on the Island. The victims were mostly menial workers at the site. They were said to be sleeping at the time of the crash.

The incident, *Daily Sun* gathered, took place at about 4:30am during the early morning downpour. Residents of the area said no fewer than 50 people normally slept in the building. It was gathered that a new set of labourers arrived the site a day before the incident, spreading speculations that many were still trapped underneath the rubble.

Tension at the site at the time of filing this report was very high, as angry co-workers, friends and family members of those believed to be trapped were unhappy about what they tagged the slow pace of rescue efforts. Two of those brought out at about 1:30pm were rescued through the efforts of sympathisers and other menial workers at the site.

Emotions ran high at the scene, as relatives and friends of the victims and trapped workers besieged the scene to assist in rescue operations. Tears flowed freely, as the dead bodies were brought out.

Men of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA, Lagos State Emergency Management Agency (LASEMA, Nigerian Civil Defence Cor7s, Red Cross Society of Nigeria, Lagos State Building Control Agency, Nigeria Police and other security agents were on ground to rescue the trapped victims from the rubble.

Meanwhile, up till about 1.30pm, some of the trapped victims could be heard shouting and calling for help. Some were said to have made distress calls to their relatives. Many of the sympathisers became furious when it appeared that the rescue mission was taking too long.

A woman, whose husband was also trapped in the building, was seen weeping uncontrollably. The man was said to be selling cooked noodles at the site until the unfortunate incident.

Some workers at the site alleged that some of the materials, especially the irons rods, used at the building were of low quality. They also accused the contractors and engineers handling the project of not paying them regularly, saying that was the reason most of them slept in the building.

Looking distressed, with bloodshot eyes, Abubakar Ali, from Jaba Ladi Local Government area of Kwai, Kaduna State, looked on as rescuers dug into an area of the collapsed structure.

He disclosed that his brother, Jamiu, was brought out dead some minutes back. His problem, he noted, was compounded by the fact that it would be difficult to break the news to his aged parents back home. He was also more saddened on how he would have to raise the two children left behind by his brother, as the deceased's wife died two years ago.

"My brother was brought out from down there dead," he said. "We stay within the area but he decided to come and sleep here so that he can collect the money they owed him."

Joseph Peter told *Daily Sun* that his close friend, Wale, who hailed from Oyo State, was also trapped in the rubble.

"We ate together yesterday. Oh, I didn't know that Wale was going to die like this. The contractor still owes Wale N25, 000. This is sad."

Musa Suleiman from Kubawu Local Government Area of Kaduna State, said his relatives, Idris, Jamulu, Ahama, Aliu, Adamu, Sabiu were still trapped underneath the building. The distressed Musa said he was afraid he had already lost his friends and might not see them again.

Martins Evans also disclosed that his friend, 26-year-old Martins, a welder at the site, was still trapped in the rubble. According to him, his friend called him when the incident happened, telling him that he was trapped by pillars and was finding it difficult to breathe.

Timothy Lokoussoe from Benin Republic was frantic, as he walked around the building site. The restless young man said three of his siblings – Prosper, Robal and Sunday were trapped under the rubble.

He disclosed that they had just returned from seeing their parents on Sunday, only for his brothers to lose their lives hours after. He also disclosed that they had not been paid for one month and had high hopes that they would be paid within the week. He disclosed that in all, seven of his countrymen were trapped underneath the debris.

Speaking on the incident, which he described as unfortunate, Lagos State Commissioner for Special Duties and Intergovernmental Relations, Mr. Seye Oladejo, noted that it was a collapse too many. He noted that illegality as regards the construction of buildings, especially flouting building rules and regulations would no longer be tolerated by the state government.

Oladejo stressed that rescue efforts were still on-going and that the state government, alongside its emergency responders, would be on ground to ensure that those trapped were rescued. He said the dead would be given the respect they deserved by being evacuated to the right place.

As regards the acquisition of the collapsed property, he assured that everything that the law said about such property would be applied, adding that the law was no respecter of anybody. He also informed that the owner of the property, if found culpable, would be prosecuted.

Crowd control at the site was very poor, even as the equipment brought was not capable of effectively rescuing those that were still trapped in the building.

At a point during the rescue effort, work was suspended due to the surging crowd and the fact that the rescue officials were being pelted with stones and sachets of water by street urchins and sympathisers.

Officials on ground said they were in need of more security officials, noting that those on ground were having a difficult time managing the crowd.

NEMA spokesman, Ibrahim Farinloye, noted that more people were still trapped. He promised that every victim would be rescued. He said his agency got the distress call at about 4:20am and promptly moved to the scene.

A reliable source told *Daily Sun* that all the structures at the Lekki Gardens were originally approved by the state government as three-storey buildings, but that the owner, one Mr. Charles, later remoulded the roof and expanded the building to five-storey.

The collapsed building has been sealed by the government until an integrity test is carried out.

The General Manager, LASEMA, Michael Akindede, said the rescue operation was slow because emergency workers did not want to injure or mutilate those that might still be alive in the building with their sophisticated equipment.

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