

LIFELINE

Lekki building tragedy

Death toll rises to 34, as rescue efforts continue

By Job Osazuwa

SIXTEEN more bodies were yesterday recovered from the building that collapsed on Tuesday in the Lekki area of Lagos. So far, 34 dead bodies have been recovered from the rubble.

The disaster, which occurred at Horizon One, Lekki Gardens, Chisco Bus Stop, Lekki, saw many menial workers trapped in the rubble of the collapsed building, which was under construction when the disaster struck.

It was learnt that the artisans were each receiving 10,000 a week as well as a N500 daily feeding allowance. But before the incident, they were owed two weeks by the contractor, residents told the reporter.

Rescue operation by different government and humanitarian agencies continued as early as 6.30am yesterday.

Many relatives and friends of artisans working at the site besieged the scene to look for their loved ones. Relatives and sympathisers wept uncontrollably as some mangled bodies were dug from the rubble. Necessary arrangements were already in place for proper identification, especially for the release of bodies needed for urgent burial according to Islamic rites.

The rescue teams, comprising the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Lagos State Emergency Management Agency (LASEMA), Red Cross Society of Nigeria and the Nigeria Police Force continued operations yesterday. Three excavators were seen working assiduously but patiently at the scene. *Daily Sun* gathered that the rescue workers were trying to ensure that the bodies were not mutilated.

The Director, Inspectorate and Compliance, Standard Organisation of Nigeria (SON), Debe Obayi, led other officers to inspect the affected building and others under construction in the area. He ordered for all the building materials to be taken for testing and scientific investigation.

He said proper investigations on the quality of materials and the competence of the professionals, handling the Lekki Gardens project would be a holistic analysis.

He advised contractors not to be too conscious of the profit they would make from investment in property, but to value lives of the workers and the prospective occupants of the buildings.

It was gathered that many people, who usually slept in the open at the site, ran to the ill-fated building to sleep when it started raining that fateful morning.

Abah Ali, the security man guarding the site, was among the dead. The body of the 35-year-old man, who sold cooked noodles at the site, was among those recovered yesterday. When his body was brought out, many people broke down and wept.

As at Tuesday morning, Abah Ali was reportedly still picking his calls, complaining that a pillar fell on his leg. When his body was eventually recovered, his leg was broken.

His body was later released to his relatives

after proper identification.

Bale Milim, from Borno State, alleged that it was the selfishness of the contractors that led to the death of many of his relatives in the building. "They were sleeping here, including me, waiting for the engineers to pay us. They kept promising us everyday to come for the money, but we were never paid."

Auwal Hassan, from Kano State, said more than 20 of his relatives perished in the building. So far, he said only six of them had been seen, regretting that they were all dead.

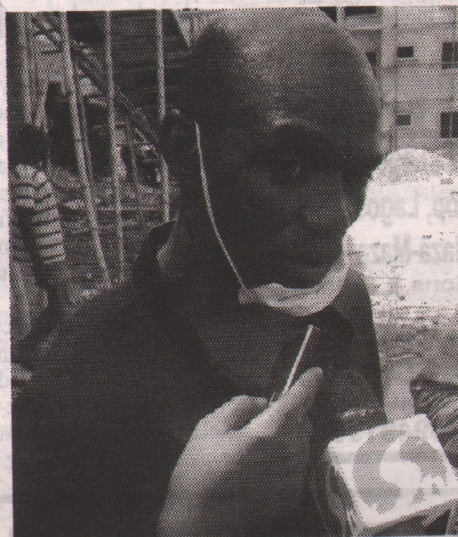
He said one of his relatives, Mariam, lost four of her children in the collapsed building. Sunday John, 29, from Benue State, who also slept in the building that unfortunate Tuesday, was still missing as at the time of filing this report. His friend, Vincent Paul, said he was sad that Sunday was not yet seen whether dead or alive.

"He was my very good friend. I saw him two days ago and we discussed and I told him about the work I needed to do outside Lekki Gardens. But now he is gone and I cannot even find him," he lamented.

On the explanation by the contractors of Lekki Gardens that work had stopped on the site since January, Paul said it was a lie. According to him and other workers at the scene, they worked there till Monday last week.

Eyewitnesses said some of those that were still missing include Yusuf Abah Yunus, John, Ado, Ibrahim, Johnson, Yakub, Elias, Isiaka, Bala, Saidu, Gwani, Buhari.

The General Manager of LASEMA, Mr. Akindele Michael, told *Daily Sun* that the



• Auwal Hassan

rescue operation would continue until the men got to ground zero of the building.

NEMA's South West Coordinator, Yakubu Suleiman, informed that those that were rescued were receiving proper medical attention at various government hospitals. He said no casualty had been recorded from the hospitals.

He praised the community members and other stakeholders for their cooperation in the search and rescue effort.

A source told the reporter that one of the 13 rescued persons died at the hospital.



• The collapsed building site yesterday.

Meanwhile, the state government yesterday condoled with residents over the death of construction workers at the site.

In a statement signed by the Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Mr. Steve Ayorinde, the government also announced that based on preliminary reports and investigation, it was discovered that the collapsed building was served contravention notice for exceeding the approved floors and thereafter sealed by the Lagos State Building Control Agency.

The statement added that the owners of the building, Messrs Lekki Worldwide Estate Limited, the promoters of Lekki Gardens, "criminally unsealed the property and continued building beyond the approved floors until the

Women empowerment can boost Nigeria's economy - Experts

A special forum to mark the International Women's Day organised for women in the Niger-Delta was on Monday held in Asaba. The forum called on all levels of government and other relevant bodies to work towards the empowerment of women in Nigeria in the interest of the country's economic development.

The forum noted that women, as good managers of the home and financial resources, could make a greater impact on the nation's economy if they were given improved access to credit and if existing barriers to women empowerment were broken.

The forum was organised by the Partnership Initiatives in the Niger-Delta (PIND), with support from Chevron Nigeria Limited, USAID and other organizations.

The event attracted participants from numerous groups and non-governmental organizations across the region, including those from the Cross River, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Ondo and Edo States as well as the host state, Delta.

Critical appraisal of the plight of women, especially those involved in agriculture, as well

as measures to effectively address the identified challenges in order to advance the cause of women in the Niger-Delta featured at the conference which lasted for about six hours.

In an address, the Programme Director of PIND, Mr. Sylvester Okoh noted that the World Economic Forum (WEF), in its Global Gender Gap Report 2015, estimated that it would take over 220 years to achieve gender parity particularly in the workplace while it would take 117 years for gender equality to be achieved in companies and government.

Okoh admitted that while no single measure could totally arrest the critical situation of the "Global Gender Gap Index", certain measures were relevant to the relative gaps between women and men across four key areas of health, education, economy and politics.

He noted that in the British Council in Nigeria report of 2012, Nigeria ranked 118 of the 234 countries by the gender equality index, saying the situation demanded intensification of efforts towards bridging the apparently yawning gap.

The Programme Director said that the report noted that most women live and work in rural areas, constituting 60-79% of the

rural workforce, which is predominantly in agriculture, with only 21% of women in non-agriculture labour force.

He therefore advocated for increased role for women in government, even as he urged Nigerians to take concrete steps to achieve gender parity more quickly.

Okoh noted that it was worrisome that an insignificant 7.2% of women in the oil-rich Niger Delta region own the land they farm on. "This acts as a major limiting factor in their ability to access credit, just as it constraints their entrepreneurship/business development," he said.

According to him, "parity is just another word for fairness or equality. That would mean things like both genders having equal opportunities, receiving equal treatment and getting equal pay."

In his remarks, Mr. Deji Hastrup, General Manager, Policy, Government and Public Affairs, Chevron, commended the collaborative efforts that culminated in the forum. He said the conference was timely, coming at a time Nigeria was struggling to break away from a mono-economic entrapment.

Said Hastrup: "The theme of the event is