

COVER Story

I'm finished, 51-year-old woman who lost only son in Lagos collapsed building laments

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IKATE Elegushi New Settlement is one of the sprawling communities fast springing up along Lekki-Ajah Expressway. Here, construction works are going on almost every hour as several homes and property outfits are constructing new estates.

However, since the morning of last Tuesday, grief and sorrow have enveloped the entire neighbourhood following the collapse of a five-storey building under construction, by Lekki Gardens.

According to reports, the collapse took place few hours after a downpour. Initially, six people were confirmed dead on the spot but by the time the rescue operation ended by 7.20 pm on Thursday, the casualty figure had risen to 34. Most of the dead persons were labourers hired to work at the site. They had turned the uncompleted building into their temporary abode, owing to their inability to raise money to rent houses within the Lekki-Ajah axis.

On Wednesday when *Saturday Sun* visited the tragedy site, rescue operation was going on, even as sympathizers and victims' family members were wailing. Some were also praying that their beloved ones should be miraculously saved.

As some dead bodies were being evacuated from the building, people burst into tears again. Several women were rolling on the floor, heaping curses on the developer handling the project.

One woman however, remained inconsolable amid the tumult. As she wailed and cried, she uttered repeatedly, "It is finished! my life is ruined! I have lost all that I've laboured for. What am I waiting for again?" She queried herself.

Speaking later with *Saturday Sun* af-

ter some sympathisers and relations had calmed her down, the woman who identified herself as Mrs Kemi Oduberu disclosed she lost her only son Yinka to the disaster.

According to her, 27-year old Yinka, a bricklayer had resumed work with Lekki Gardens about six months ago. As if she had premonition of his death, she had advised him to resign from the construction outfit when she learnt that her son was being owed almost six months salary.

"It was as if I had premonition that something tragic would happen to him. When I was told that he and some of his colleagues were being owed several months salary arrears, I told him to resign and join me in Ijebu-Ode. He told me they had promised to pay them on Tuesday, which was the same day he alongside others died in the collapsed building. Had he come back last Monday which I insisted that he should, this tragedy would have been averted. God, why me?" The distraught looking woman asked nobody in particular.

Sobbing intermittently, the 51-year old widow who further revealed that she lost her husband October last year said her son's death had added to her sorrow. "I pray that God will give me the strength to cope with this double tragedy. How I will cope? I don't know. Yinka's father died in October last year. When we lost his father, he was the one consoling me, promising to take care of me. He promised to do a lot of things for me, but see where everything has ended. All is vanity. I'm tired of everything about this life," she lamented.

On what the family plans to do next, a relation of the widow, Aisha, chipped in that the main concern of the family is how to retrieve Yinka's corpse for burial.

"We were told that we will have to



One woman however, remained inconsolable amid the tumult. As she wailed and cried, she uttered repeatedly, "It is finished! my life is ruined! I have lost all that I've laboured for. What am I waiting for again?" Speaking later with Saturday Sun after some sympathisers and relations had calmed her down, the woman who identified herself as Mrs Kemi Oduberu disclosed she lost her only son Yinka to the disaster.



Mrs Oduberu

complete the relevant procedure and after that, we will take the corpse back to Ijebu-Ode for burial. God knows everything. It is God that knows everything, we can't question him. But it is sad that Yinka had to die this way. He would have been alive if they are not being owed by their employers. I want Lagos State government to take action on this tragedy, and ensure that those responsible for these avoidable deaths don't go scot-free," she pleaded.

Aisha who added that it would take a long time to erase the pains of Yinka's death from the family said: "Yinka was a quiet young man, hard-working, energetic and full of life. It is sad and unbelievable that I have to describe him now in the past tense. How the mother will be able to cope, only God knows."

While Oduberu family was mourning their own loss, at another section of the collapsed building site, a group of people, mostly Hausa labourers were frantically calling the names of their missing kinsmen. Some even made futile attempt to remove some rods and collapsed slabs in the hope that they might be able to rescue some trapped labourers. At a point they became restive and started shouting while accusing rescue officials including the personnel of Lagos State Emergency Management Agency, and those of National Emergency Management Agency, NEMA of being too slow and ineffective.

Saturday Sun further gathered that the Hausa labourers were irked that the corpse of some of their kinsmen were not released to them for burial in compliance with Islamic tenets.

The situation almost degenerated into a riot until some rescue officials and some residents had to intervene and made necessary explanations before frayed nerves were calmed.

"Yesterday it was the same situation. At a point we thought another bloody clash was going to erupt until some elders and government officials intervened to bring about normalcy, said Junaid, a resident who was an eye witness to the heated argument between the Hausa labourers and rescue officials the previous day.

Saturday Sun further observed that some other houses that were very close to the building showed signs of distress with cracks all over the walls. Confirming residents' fear about the ugly development, a resident who identified himself as Tobi said: "Residents in this estate are all afraid now as some other buildings being put up by Lekki Gardens are showing signs of distress. Some of

them are cracking and it is the same developer and the same property outfit, Lekki Gardens that put up the construction – although when this building collapsed, some officials from the Lagos State Building Control Agency came here and marked some buildings for demolition, but this is not the first time they will be doing so, as they hardly take any follow up action. We don't know whether LAB-SCA officials have been compromised. We want Governor Akinwumi Ambode to look into this issue. I'm speaking the minds of many residents."

Daily Sun gathered that perhaps, the casualty rate might not have been on the high side after the building had collapsed but for alleged failure of the management of Lekki Gardens to cooperate with the rescue agencies.

It was learnt that while rescue teams from LASEMA and NEMA had arrived the disaster site for hours to commence operation, they were expecting a team from Lekki Gardens to join them but this was not to be so.

"What those people did was bad. It was callous of Lekki Gardens Company not to have sent a team to join the rescue efforts. Their logistic assistance would have helped to reduce the death toll. We had expected them to provide us map, or any other information as to the location where people are likely to be staying inside the building, but unfortunately they were nowhere to be seen, and for two days we spent there for rescue operation, none of the officials of Lekki Gardens showed up," lamented Ibrahim Farinloye, Spokesman, National Emergency Management Agency, NEMA.

Farinloye while insisting that the rescue agencies did their own job to the best of their ability believed that Lekki Gardens management has questions to answer. He also debunked allegations that rescue teams didn't arrive the site on time.

"People making that allegations are not correct. We arrived the site within 30 minutes of being alerted, and we started rescue work immediately. We were joined by other agencies later. Like I said earlier, the high casualty would have been reduced if the management of Lekki Gardens had provided logistic support," Farinloye declared.

Following public outcry over the latest collapsed building, Lagos State government ordered the directors of Lekki Gardens to report themselves to Lagos State Commissioner of Police pending further actions to be taken by the state government.



Scene of the collapsed building