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Drink water and die

— 27th April 2016

•37 residents die after drinking water from contaminated pond in Abuja

•Victims complain of seeing strange light rays in the night before dying

By Magnus Eze

When the late Afro-beat king, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti sang: "Water no get enemy", regarded as one of his greatest hits, he may have drawn his inspiration from the popular saying that water is life.

But, all that was thawed recently when water turned an enemy to the inhabitants of Saburi 1, a slum settlement in Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC) as 37 persons reportedly died after drinking contaminated water.

It was yet to be confirmed what caused the death of the 38th casualty identified as 14-year-old Mariam Mustapha, who died on April 8 in circumstances akin to how the 37 others died.

When *Abuja Metro* visited the village on April 14, fear was still in the air. The people were particularly worried that the cause of the death had not been made public. Some residents even accused the FCT Minister, Muhammad Bello, of negligence because such number of persons died under his nose and nothing was done to calm frayed nerves.

Those who spoke to *Abuja Metro* said most of the victims complained of headache or fever and took medication from patent medicine dealers and, "the next you will hear is that they have died."

Our correspondent visited one of the private clinics in the community, which has no public health care facility, for an informed medical opinion. A nurse, Ms Salome Maikalfi of Cosom Medical Clinic, said the deaths were not ordinary.

Though none of the victims was brought to the clinic as most of the villagers always complained of being too poor to pay medical bills, she said the issue was more spiritual than medical.

"We heard that most of the victims complained of headache and bought drugs from the local chemist. None of them went to hospital and within two days of the ailment, each of them died.

"Most of the victims were said to have complained of seeing strange light rays or objects they could not describe in the night before they died", she said.

Checks revealed that the story making the rounds in the community was that the gods were not happy because a chief allegedly sold the graveyard to people to build residential houses.

Another resident, Blessing Sunday, who runs a food kiosk, said residents were still waiting for the outcome of the visit of Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA) officials who came and even tested the water in the area.

"They came here two times in February and till now, no result. We did not hear anything from anybody. I do not know whether anybody cares about us again. You can see that the population of the community has reduced. Many people have left. Those of us who are still here, live in fear of what will happen next," she said.

Abuja Metro visited the palace of the Dankaci Saburi 1, Alhaji Muhammad Yamwawo. Speaking through an interpreter, he confirmed that the community recently recorded multiple deaths, but refused to comment on the alleged sale of the community cemetery.

He, however, appealed to government to site a primary health care centre in the community, saying they depend on private clinics or go as far as Kubwa for medical treatment.

Some residents linked the incident to water, but told *Abuja Metro* that the community has more than 10 boreholes and only uses water from the stream for washing and bathing. At the stream, people were seen defecating and dumping waste at the edges.

Even the Dankaci Saburi 1 confirmed that water was not a problem because the community has 12 boreholes.

Cause of deaths

Strangely, while the people wallowed in ignorance and superstition, it turned out that the community was actually victim of 'killer' water.

Media Assistant to the FCT Minister, Mr. Sani Abubakar, said investigations by the Health Department revealed that the deaths were caused by contaminated water from some of the boreholes in the area that were close to septic tanks.

The acting secretary of FCTA Health and Human Services, Social Development Secretariat (SDS), Mrs. Alice Achu, told *Abuja Metro* that the contamination was immediately contained to forestall epidemic.

"When it happened, we went there; took some samples and went to the laboratory. We submitted the report to the minister who directed the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), the Water Board and others to do some intervention", she said.

According to her, the calamity would have been averted or the number of casualties reduced if the people had gone to the hospital for medical attention.

Achu said though there was neither primary health care centre nor public hospital in Saburi 1, there were public health care facilities in nearby Dei-Dei community. Reacting to complaints by families of the victims that they could not afford hospital bills, she said they should have gone to hospital and let it be that the hospital refused to attend to them or that they could not pay after treatment.

However, she said the FCTA would have come to their rescue, adding that the few of them who went to the hospital for treatment survived.

Speaking further on the cause of the deaths, Achu heaped the blame on dirty habits. She said the Department of Public Health's report showed that faecal matter found its way into their water source and contaminated it.

Also, it was gathered that part of government's intervention was to educate the residents on basic hygiene.

Achu said that the water board was working on how to provide alternative sources of water in the community, while the AEPB and the department of public health are to educate them on how to keep their environment clean.

During one of the visits by *Abuja Metro* on April 21, a team from the World Health Organisation (WHO) carrying out enumeration for the forthcoming Africa vaccine week, was also at the community's stream which is surrounded by heaps of refuse and faeces but from where residents also draw water for washing their clothes and other domestic use.

Sources stated that the WHO was planning a sanitation programme for Saburi 1 community.

Meanwhile, the Federal Government has said it would build toilets in public places across the country to stem open defecation and engender healthy environment.

Minister of the Environment, Mrs. Amina Mohammed, who was a guest on a Radio Nigeria Network programme on Tuesday, said amid recent UNICEF report that over 50 million Nigerians indulge in open defecation.

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