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11 feared dead, scores injured in Calabar fire outbreak

— 17th July 2017

From Judex Okoro, Calabar

About 11 persons were feared dead, yesterday, with scores injured, in a fire outbreak in Calabar metropolis, Cross River State.

The tragedy is against the backdrop of over 17 people killed in a communal and cult clashes in Yakurr and Yala local government areas of the state, two

weeks ago.

Yesterday's fire incident, which started about 3:00am and lasted over four hours, was said to be due to alleged illegal activities by oil dealers around Esuk Utan community.

Esuk Utan is where the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) depot and jetty are located.

Daily Sun investigations showed that most times, especially at night, the place is beehive of activities as youths and some oil dealers siphoned petroleum products.

A witness, Johnson Akpang, said: "About 2:00am yesterday, a group of illegal oil dealers had gone for their usual illegal activities to siphon fuel when a vessel belonging to Linc Oil and Gas tank farm was pumping fuel from the ship that berth at the jetty.

"While they had connected their pipes to the pipe line with intent to divert the product to another illegal tank farm, the pressure suddenly increased and fuel started pouring out in torrents.

"Within a split second, their illegally connected pipes burst and fuel spilled into the nearby community, prompting residents to come in droves to scoop the product."

Akpang recounted that while they were scooping fuel, one of them lit a cigarette and it immediately sparked off fire, leading to explosion which killed about five persons instantly and later, six others died while scores were injured.

A community leader at Esuk Utan, who declined to be named, added: "We heard an explosion in the early hours of yesterday as result of illegal oil activities going on there. And, we rushed out but before we got there, about six of our boys have been burnt to death due to the fire outbreak.

"We are still searching for three more persons. Perhaps, they might have been burnt to ashes by the fire because it was a big explosion."

But, a staff of the depot, who spoke with Daily Sun but declined to be named as well, said the fire outbreak occurred when staff of the depot were discharging old products into new tanks.

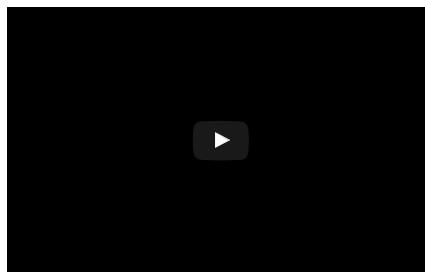
"The vessel that brought in our new product is just by the port here. Some of our staff were discharging the old product from the tank with a view to bring in the new one before the fire outbreak occurred," he said.

Confirming the incident, Commissioner for Police, Hafiz Inuwa, said nine people died during the explosion that occurred at Linc Oil and Gas tank farm at about 3:00am yesterday.

Inuwa added that other persons who sustained third degree injuries are currently being treated in one of the hospitals in Calabar, adding that the manager of the depot had not briefed him on what led to the explosion.

"Until now, nobody has come out to tell us that this is what caused the fire outbreak. We have gone round, we have done what we could do; but, investigation will later reveal what actually led to the explosion.

"For now, nine people are confirmed dead and many others who sustained different burns are currently receiving treatment in one of the hospitals around town," he said.



But, Commissioner for Petroleum, Itaya Nyong, told newsmen in Calabar that over 10 persons were killed in the inferno which occurred at about 3:00am yesterday.

Nyong, who regretted the incident, advised residents against scooping petroleum product whenever there was an oil spill.

He assured state government would fish out those responsible for the fire outbreak.



Officials from the Cross State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), were seen assessing the extent of damage caused by the explosion.



It was learnt that the fire also affected the high tension cable inside the depot's transformer, while two vehicles and other important facilities were also burnt to ashes.



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