

Man who lost daughter, nephews in Abuja school bus fire says: I've forgiven everyone, but my heart still bleeds

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For the families of Dr. Ikechukwu Eze and Godwin Eze, Thursday, February 1 would for long remain a sad day in their memory. It was the day they both lost their children in an inferno in Abuja.

While the former lost two sons, Udochukwu Eze, 5, and Sommachi Eze, 2, the latter lost a daughter, Amarachi Eze, 4. It was one day that both families would never forget.

All was going well with both families all through the morning hours until about 3:30pm when a call brought the unfortunate news.

Mr. Godwin Eze told the reporter his story: "The distress call that broke the sad news to me came from an unknown individual. Immediately I picked the call, the voice from the other end never hesitated to pass the information of the sudden misfortune that visited my family and that of my brother.

"The misfortune resulted in the premature death of our children, my daughter and two sons of my brother. As expected, the sad news instantly shattered my day and changed my entire body chemistry, countenance and mood. I was totally destabilised.

"Immediately I dropped the call, I abandoned all that I was doing and rushed to the scene of the incident to know what might have happened to my daughter whom I sent to school to acquire the needed knowledge and skills that would expectedly better her future."

The three children attended Je'nisi Little Drop Academy, Trade Moore Estate, Lugbe, Abuja. The sad event occurred at about 3:30pm when the children, 13 in number, were being conveyed home in their school bus after the close of school activities. But on their way home, the driver was said to have noticed that the bus had developed a mechanical fault to the point that it could not move anymore. Passers-by told Daily Sun that the driver abandoned the bus at the spot and went in search of a mechanic. Unfortunately, he left the children inside the broken down bus without a child minder.

An eyewitness who identified himself as Durojaye told the reporter that soon after the driver returned with a mechanic, they began to fix the bus on the spot.

"The puzzle that no one could answer was what happened to the bus that it went up in flames. Immediately the bus caught fire, the driver and the mechanic scampered for safety, leaving the 13 children in the locked bus.

"It was the children that started shouting when the heat of the flames began to affect them. God might have visited them with divine strength and wisdom at that point to break the bus door and escape the inferno. Ten of them were lucky to escape with minor injuries but the three that died could not make it.

"Regrettably, Amarachi Eze and Sommachi were burnt, while the third child, Udochukwu, died in the hospital after he could not survive the burns he sustained while trying to rescue his brother, Sommachi.

"Rescue efforts by passers-by could not help because such came late. That was how the lives of these innocent children were lost to carelessness and negligence of the driver, child minder, mechanic and the school management," he said.

As the sad news of the children's sudden death filtered in, a sombre calm enveloped the entire estate. Family members and neighbours rushed to the homes of Godwin and Ikechukwu Eze to get the true information.

Daily Sun's reporter was one of the early callers at the home of the late pupils. It was indeed a rain of tears and emotions, as sympathisers and neighbours gathered to console the bereaved families.

While some confident neighbours went inside the house to share the sad moments with the bereaved families, others stood in groups under a tent outside, discussing the incident in sorrowful tones.

Some women, who could not bear the loss, took to the streets to register their frustration with the recklessness of the school management to issues of human life.

Armed with placards with different inscriptions, the women, all clad in black attire, called the attention of the relevant authorities to the unending loss of school children to the carelessness of school managers.

One of the aggrieved parents said: "Inasmuch as their lives could not be recovered, government and school managers should give priority to the issues of safety in schools, particularly the children kept under their care. Relevant stakeholders should double their efforts to undertake periodic inspection of the schools to ensure they comply with minimum safety measures," one respondent said.

While some parents put the blame on the school management for their careless attitude towards the lives of their pupils, others blamed the Ministry of Education and other safety agencies for their inability to carry out statutory supervision roles on schools.

But Mr. Godwin Eze said he has forgiven the school.

He said: "At no point have I suspected any foul play or sabotage. My family and I have good a relationship with the school management. They have also been kind and friendly to my children and at no time have I had any cause to question their competence and capacity to care for my children. I have accepted the situation in good faith."

But the case was different with Dr. Ikechukwu Eze. He demanded that a coroner's inquest be constituted to unravel the true cause of the inferno that resulted in the death of his two sons.

He said: "There are several unanswered questions in this entire scenario. The coroner's inquest will provide the opportunity for the unanswered questions to get convincing response."

Dr. Eze, who broke down in tears, described one of his son as a great and brilliant mind that had passion for engineering.

"He was inquisitive to challenge the existing practices, bold, courageous and curious," he noted. "He had done what people at his age were always afraid to attempt. His mum and I had great plans for him to get better and quality education that would support his plans and life aspirations. But all these have gone with the wind. I will miss them greatly."

Family members, neighbours, colleagues and other well-wishers have been standing by the bereaved families.

Godwin and Ikechukwu Eze said they appreciated the school's PTA, the FCT Education Secretariat, Association of Private School Proprietors, estate residents, neighbours, and well-wishers for their concern and words of encouragement.

The reporter was unable to reach either the school proprietress or the PTA chairman, as they were said to be unavailable. The proprietress, alongside the school bus driver, were said to be in police custody while the school was said to have been closed temporarily pending the conclusion of investigation.

Police spokesman in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Mr. Ajuguri Manzah, a deputy superintendent of police, confirmed the incident and added that investigation was ongoing to ascertain the true cause of the inferno. He, however, declined comments on the arrest and detention of the school proprietress and the driver.