

•Victims' families, residents seek justice, decry police arrests

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SHARES VIEWS

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On Thursday, April 11, residents of Ogijo, a popular town situated between Ikorodu, Lagos, and Sagamu in Ogun State, were thrown into mourning following the deaths in a factory of three young men.

Amaechi Joseph, 40, Adedayo Dauda, 23, and David Jasper, 26, were killed in an explosion that also left several others injured at African Foundries Nigeria Limited. The steel manufacturing company, owned and operated by some Indians, is located at Kilometre 56, Ikorodu-Shagamu Expressway, Ogijo, Ogun State.

And since the incident, the families of the victims have been mourning and crying for justice. The reporter also learnt that the police have literally invaded the community since the incident.

Mr. Sikiru Dauda, father of the late Adedayo, voiced his sorrow to the reporter. He said: “My heart bleeds at the moment. The sorrow that I feel over the death of my eldest son, Adedayo Dauda, is excruciating. He was a

promising young man who had dreams of being a successful businessman. He was very funny and everybody knew him in the community.”

He explained that Adedayo had concluded his job schedule on the fateful night but had to wait till the morning for his colleague that was to take over from him. But an explosion occurred that claimed his life and two others.

“It was like a bomb explosion. Shortly after the blast, I felt like something bad had happened to me, so I decided to go to the company because people were rushing there, which is close to my house, to see how we could save those trapped in the building. But the security guard at the gate didn’t allow us into the premises. I think that was why people became angry. But rather than rescuing the victims before they died, the management invited the police, alleging that the people wanted to destroy the company’s property. And that was not true,” he said.

One of the workers who preferred anonymity said the explosion occurred about 7:30am at the AOD section of the company.

He said one of the victims, Amaechi Joseph, had raised the alarm a few hours before the blast that the steel-grinding mill, popularly called melting pot, was not working properly. He regretted that Amaechi’s observations and requests were ignored.

“We melt scrap into iron rods and steel. Joseph was the first to raise the alarm that the pot was not discharging properly, but rather than listen to him, the supervisors said he should continue his job, and that they would do the repairs at the weekend. But a few hours after his observation, the pot blasted and everywhere was engulfed in flames. Adedayo and Joseph were badly affected because they were somewhere in the bathroom when the incident happened,” he said.

Amaechi, who was married and had two children, had been working at the factory for the past seven years.

Wife of the deceased, Mrs. Muyibat Joseph, said she had no premonition of her husband’s death. She said: “Before he left for work on Wednesday, I didn’t know that would be the last encounter between us. He had promised to return home early for us to sort out some of our domestic issues. I didn’t know that would be the last discussion I would have with him. Now, I have lost everything.

“Joseph was my father, my best friend and husband. How do I take care of the two children he left behind?”

The reporter learnt that most of the workers who work the morning and evening shifts are on contract arrangement. Each shift is 12 hours long, between 7am and 7pm daily, including on holidays and weekends, and they are paid N1,000 daily. During working hours, nobody is allowed to go out of the premises.

One of the residents that spoke with the reporter alleged that Amaechi was abandoned for hours before the company’s ambulance took him and other victims to a private hospital in the area. It was gathered that Adedayo was eventually found dead in the company’s reservoir after several efforts to locate him proved abortive.

Residents claimed that such incidents were frequent in the company, noting that on each occasion, such disaster is kept away from public glare.

Ologijo of Ogijo, Oba Gbadamosi Kuselu, said the entire town was saddened by the incident.

“It is unfortunate that I have to speak to journalists on the issue. But first and foremost, efforts are on to stop these unnecessary killings. We are engaging the company, the workers and the contractors to ensure that the safety of the workers and their welfare is guaranteed, not only in African Foundries, but in all other companies in my community. The people involved are bereaved at the moment and we need to comfort them. We need to consider their feelings.”

The company’s human resources manager, Mr. Pedro, who said the company regretted the sad event, stated that there were ongoing efforts to console the families of the deceased.

“We are on top of the situation,” he told the reporter. “And efforts are underway to forestall any recurrence.”

In his reaction to the incident, a community leader in Ogijo, Mr. Olajide Osho described the late Adedayo as a very jovial young man who was full of life.

“It is almost 10 years that the company has been in our community. We have been witnessing such incidents, but the last event was particularly sad, and that was why the workers protested. It is sad that those arrested in connection with the protest have been taken to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad headquarters in Abeokuta, the state capital. Majority of the workers are contract workers with no entitlement. They were cut down in their prime. The contractors in the company are nine; they are in charge of hiring the contract staff. The work schedule there is agonising.

“Each of the nine contractors has at least 125 contract workers. We seek justice because this is not the first time that workers would be killed without any compensation. Government should intervene because Nigerians are being treated like slaves in their country by these companies.

“In our community, a former worker with the company, Olamilekan Ashaolu, lost his leg in an accident at the company. He has been abandoned by the management and nobody is talking about him now,” he said.

Counsel to the families of the deceased, Mr. Bamidele Ajayi, described the incident as complete exploitation of Nigerians by the Indians.

“It is pathetic because the foreigners do not respect the laws of our country. They flout laws at will because they have some prominent people in society backing them up. This is sad.

“You can imagine when there was an explosion and people died. They brought in the police to maintain peace, and the police, rather than maintain peace, are now arresting people. This is ridiculous. Yes, we can understand that, sometimes, hoodlums might hijack such a protest but when the people can identify the perpetrators, the police

should understand. Many of the people arrested are workers at the company as well as other people who were doing their normal businesses in the community.

“What we want in Ogijo community right now is sanity and justice. Our community has, for a very long time now, been polluted with smoke and other emissions from these companies. This happens every day as a result of their activities. And when you look at the law, the damage done to lives is not commensurate with the fines being charged for such activities. So, our laws are not adequate for this kind of experience. And that is why these people can flout the law at will. I know what it means for people to be suffering from this air pollution. It is killing. For instance, the Ogijo monarch has raised his voice over this in the past but nobody cares. He is just being concerned. He wants sanity in Ogijo community and its environs, but some people are bent on frustrating his efforts. And that is too bad,” he said.