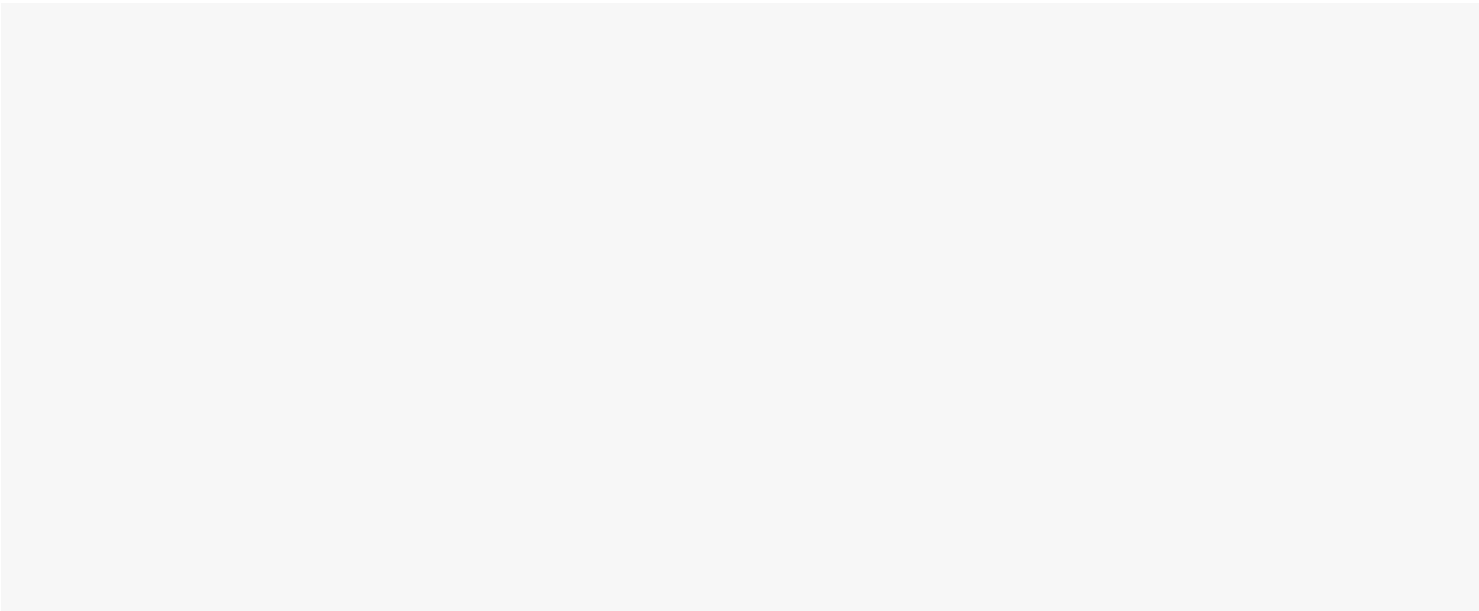


Ijegun pipeline fire: When Armageddon visited Lagos

Two dead, 30 vehicles, buildings, shops razed, as survivors, recount narrow escape Govt not doing enough to stop pipeline vandals, residents lament

5th July 2019



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Tessy Igomu

It was the day of the Armageddon in Ijegun, a community in Igando-Ikotun Local Council Development Area of Lagos State, on Thursday.

Hell literally visited the community in the early hours of the morning when a ruptured pipeline of the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) exploded, triggering a monumental inferno.



Two people were burnt to death, while several others sustained severe burn injuries in the fire incident.

Over 30 vehicles, shops and buildings were also consumed by the inferno. Most of the items burnt were in close proximity to the canal where the fuel from the burst pipe emptied into. A part of Ijegun Comprehensive High School was also affected, as well as a fuel station, Abamat Oil Nigeria Limited.

The fire, according to residents, started at about 5am following a bunkering activity that saw fuel spilling into a drainage that snaked through the Ijegun community.

A resident informed the reporter that the oil thieves had arrived the area at about 1.30am with trucks and were on their way out of the place after siphoning fuel from a vandalised pipeline when one of their tankers fell and spilled its contents.

Most residents said they were jolted from sleep by the deafening explosions that rocked the area. Many promptly abandoned their beds and scampered to safety.

Most of the devastation was recorded on Awe Lumake Street. It was also where the two victims of the inferno were trapped and burnt to death. Their charred remains were covered with sheaths, awaiting evacuation.

A resident of the street, Femi Agboola, said about 4am, he started perceiving the pungent tang of petroleum products and he quickly raised the alarm. He noted that the fire was yet to start then. He further disclosed that one of those that died in the fire was a commercial bus driver. Agoola informed that the bus driver was warned to leave the vehicle as it was too dangerous to start the engine.

“The man did not listen to us and said he wanted to pick up early morning passengers. At a point, he begged us to help him push the vehicles to a point. When we realised he wanted to start the engine, we all ran away. The next thing we heard was an explosion and the man was covered in flames. He ran with fire into the canal. But, unfortunately, the canal was also in flames.”

The dead man was later identified by his neighbour, Catherine igbokwe, as Austin Japan. Hassan Umoru, a security man that escaped death by the whiskers, said the second victim was a fellow security man in the place. He said the victim was trying to locate the exact place the spill was coming from when he heard the first explosion.

As heavy black smokes billowed into the sky and the fire raged, utter chaos and apprehension enveloped Ijegun community. Amid the chaos and confusion, ruins of people's means of livelihood were spread out. Also scattered around were charred remains of what was once property of residents who narrowly escaped the vicious assault of the rampaging, early morning petroleum fire that snaked through the neighbourhood.

Happy that he survived the inferno was Biodun Alade, a resident of Awe Lumake Street. He stated that the choking smell of petroleum product woke him from sleep. Without wasting time, he recalled, he immediately woke his parents and three siblings, and they all moved to a more elevated part of the street.

“Immediately we got to the beginning of the street, the whole area exploded into flames. There was a man that was trying to start his bus; he was roasted alive. The fire also affected a part of my father’s house. My mother’s shop was totally razed. The government needs to have this place secured.”

Umoru Hassan, a security man on the same street, expressed gratitude to God for sparing his life. His security post, which doubles as his bedroom, was completely razed. He is, however, sad that his colleague and friend, a fellow guard, was killed by the inferno.

“The whole place smelt of petrol and when I looked inside the gutter, it was full of it. Immediately I moved away from my room, I saw fire everywhere. The only clothed I have are the ones I am wearing now.”

Catherine Igbokwe wailed uncontrollably and mumbled incoherently after identifying one of the victims of the inferno. She said the deceased was her family friend, a certain Austin Japan. She further said that the wife of the deceased came with her but was tricked into believing that the place was too rowdy for her.

“She is not far from here. What do I tell her? She had already seen and identified her husband’s burnt bus. Ha! This is too much to bear.”

Not long after, the wife of Austin walked towards the wailing woman but was fenced off by family members who quickly whisked her away.

Trying to salvage what he could from his foodstuff shop was Chijioke Awam. The young man who claimed to have just been settled by his boss, after 10 years of apprenticeship, was in tears. He said he would have been roasted alive in his shop, safe for the fact that he went for a vigil. He said he had just taken delivery of goods running into half a million naira when the unwanted visitor came calling.

As he was being consoled by sympathisers, he fumbled about, rummaging through bags of burnt beans, rice, garri, wheat, among others, blinded by his own tears. Chukwudi Amaelechi, a bus driver, is another victim. At the moment, he feels sad and hopeless. He said he not only lost the bus that sustains his family, he is also indebted to his friend that gave him the vehicle on lease.

The father of five said the vehicle was given to him by his friend in Holland at N2.8 million, noting that he had only paid the friend N800, 000.

The 16-passenger, he said, had developed an engine problem which warranted it being parked at the spot where it was razed. He said he had just bought an engine worth N140,000, which was just mounted by a mechanic.

“I am finished. What do I tell my friend now? He gave me this bus six months ago, after I told him my predicament. He won’t believe my story.

“I usually ferry passengers from Ijegun to Bolade daily. I was called this morning to come and see what was left of my bus. My rent has just expired and my children’s school fees are still pending. Who did I offend? Please, help me to beg the state government to help. My life will be over without people’s help.”

Austin Obialu also suffered the same fate. A commercial bus driver, he also lost his bus which was brought to an auto shop in the area for panel beating. The bus, he said was a brand new one with 14-seating capacity.

“The panel beater is somewhere around, crying. He was meant to have finished with this bus some days back. Aside my vehicle, he also had three other Tokunbo buses that were just brought to him for repairs,” he said.

Residents of the area are aggrieved. They told the reporter that the activities of the vandals of petroleum pipelines were endangering the lives of people in the community. They lamented that daily, the vandals get more emboldened and are aided by security agents.

Mrs. Okeke, a resident, said people there usually thank God each time a day passes and nothing happens. She stated that there was a similar spill months back but noted that nothing happened. “I have been praying to God to give us money so we can move to a better part of Lagos. I barely sleep well at night. These people come here every night to siphon fuel. The government should do something fast. We are all living on borrowed time,” she said.

On May 15, 2008, a pipeline explosion also rocked the community, after a pipeline spilled premium motor spirit, otherwise known as petrol, from a punctured pipeline. Scores were killed and injured, while hundreds were displaced from their homes.

Speaking on the fire incident, the chief executive officer of Lagos State Emergency Management Agency (LASEMA), Dr. Oke Osanyintolu, said on arrival that vandals engaged in bunkering activities where an NNPC pipeline was buried caused the inferno.

He said the vandals had already siphoned petrol into a 33,000-litre tanker, while a second tanker of the same capacity was being loaded, adding that they were intercepted by security operatives. He said in an attempt to escape from the security agents, some of the siphoned fuel spilled into the drainage and the vandals then set the vehicle on fire in a bid to deter the security operatives from apprehending them.

Osanyintolu said: “The fire then spread back to the pipeline, the point where the vandals had siphoned the fuel and exploded. The fire escalated, leading to two fatalities and over 30 vehicles were also burnt. The actual loss will be determined upon conducting post-disaster enumeration after the fire has been put out.”

He said responders at the scene include fire officials of the Lagos State Fire Service, officials of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Nigeria Police Force and other agencies.

It was gathered that 12 people had so far been rescued. Eight victims with severe burns, he said, were taken to the Burns Unit at the Gbagada General Hospital for treatment, while the other four were taken to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH). The two dead bodies were deposited at the morgue in Yaba

Speaking on the incident, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) spokesperson for South West, Ibrahim Farinloye said the management of the NNPC was immediately alerted to the fire outbreak, adding that the Safety Unit of the corporation immediately shut down supplies to the affected pipeline in order to stop the fire.

He also asserted that vandals were responsible for the incident and some of them were affected by the inferno.

Farinloye said security agencies have condoned off the area to stop it from being accessed by undesirable elements. He advised people in the area to remain calm and go about their normal businesses.



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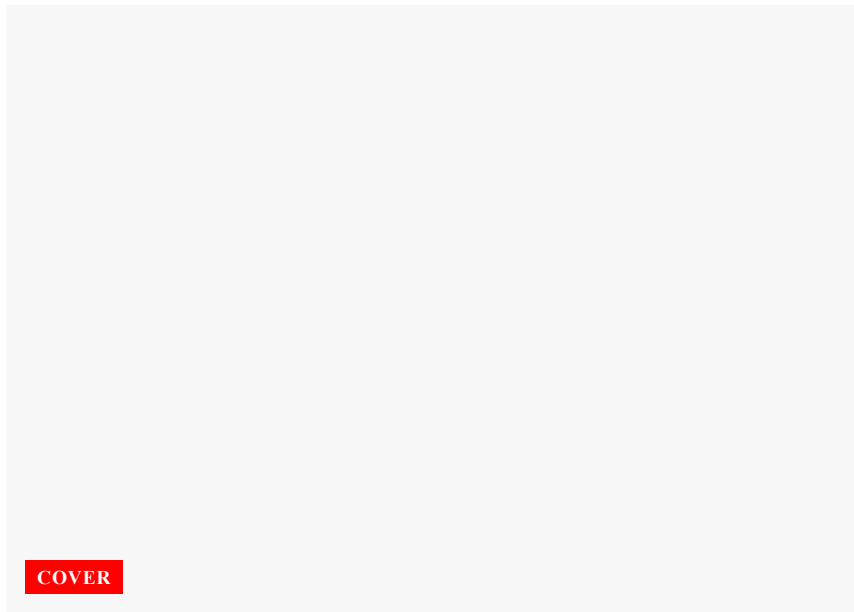
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