

Fume of death

► How 8 persons perished in one day inside underground water tank in Enugu, while trying to rescue one another

17th August 2019

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Felix Ikem, Nsukka

When Omeke Eze and his fellow workers and constructors, numbering six, bade farewell to their family members while leaving their homes on July 22, 2019, there was no indication that they would not return to their loved ones alive. They was no premonition that they were embarking on journey of no return. But few hours later the unexpected happened and they were all dead in one fell swoop of grim harvest.

In fact, as far as they were concerned, that day was another working day for them and their friends from Amachalla community in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State. And come to think, why shouldn't they be upbeat as the weather was bright making them to continue with their bricklaying and carpentry work. Omeke, the headman or team leader and his workmates namely, Uchechukwu Idoko, Oluchi Eze, Ejike Onu, Emeka Abugu, Ifeanyi Abugu, Amauche Abugu and one other mason from Eha-Amufu were said to have set about their work few metres away from each other.

Sources said they had planned to finish the work by 3 pm to enable them go for the contract negotiation of another building located in the nearby community. But little did they know that death was lurking in the corner that bright day morning. Little did they know that that was their last day on earth! By 2 pm, about one hour before their intended deadline, tragedy struck.

Tragedy unfolds its wing of death through a trapped man

An eyewitness who gave his name as Chinedu Odo told *Saturday Sun* that another mason working at a building site belonging to one Stephen Uramah, ran short of water and decided to pump some with a sumo machine said to be submerged in an underground water tank that had a window-like opening on its rooftop, to enable him make some supply to the site. Few minutes later, the man who hails from Eha-Amufu, Isi-Uzo Local Government Area, started shouting for help.

A passerby who heard his cry ran to Omeke and his workmates and told them about the curious development. One of them who rushed to the scene, on seeing the man distressed and leaning on the wall, was said to have climbed down the tank in order to pull him out. But after some minutes when Omeke did not see both the man that was said to be in distress and his worker who went to help him, emerging from the tank, he decided to climb in to see what was amiss.

But for some minutes after he climbed into the tank, he too became overwhelmed by whatever had continued to detain or hold the other two who went into the place earlier, from coming out. Later finding showed they were choked to death by fume, suspected to be heavy carbon monoxide reported to have emanated from the sumo machine installed somewhere inside the tank. Ignorant of this fact and its attendant effect, another worker said to be worried about the

fate of his master, Omeke, and his co-worker, was said to have climbed in to rescue them. But he ended up trapped like others. And, another, and another, and still another until they were all entrapped, overwhelmed and suffocated to death by the killer fume inside the tank. It was a tragedy without rhyme or reason to it, a strange tale never heard before in the community.

Families mourn their untimely death

When *Saturday Sun* visited Amachalla community it found the families of the deceased enveloped by a pall of mourning. Mrs. Caroline Eze, Omeke Eze's mother told our reporter that she was yet to overcome the shock of his sudden demise. Recalling their last encounter and conversation before tragedy struck and how she learnt of it, she said: "That morning, he came to me, greeted me before setting out for work. I was in my room when I heard some people shouting that Omeke and his work mates have been trapped inside the tank. I managed to drag myself to the scene to see for myself what was going on. But some people pushed me back, telling me that they would be taken to

the hospital for treatment. But few hours later, our people started wailing, confirming the worst, that my son and the other seven persons have been confirmed dead in the hospital at Ogrute.”

Explaining her shock, the septuagenarian told *Saturday Sun*: “Since after the death of my son, I have been down in health. I am totally tired of the world.” Asked what she thinks of their nature of death, she replied: “I suspect that my son did not die a natural death. He was bewitched by some bad persons either in our community or elsewhere. But, all I know is that he didn’t die a natural death. He was a generator repairer before he died and he just decided to go into building construction to augment his source of income.”

When *Saturday Sun* visited Mr. John Onu, father of another deceased, Ejike Onu, he told our reporter that July 22, 2019 would never be forgotten in a hurry in his life. Explaining how he learnt of the sad news, he said: “I was in my house when I heard what happened. I didn’t go to see what happened and how it happened.”

Stopping momentarily to regain his breath, he pointed at a new uncompleted building and said: “This is his new uncompleted building which he planned to move into this December. I suspect foul play in the whole scenario. How can he die inside a tank just like that? Till this moment, the man inside whose tank my son died has not told me when they would bring my son’s corpse home for burial.” He told our reporter that his deceased son who, according to him, was a carpenter before his untimely death, was full of ambition and energy but now those qualities are going to be interred with his body.

A survivor’s tale

Recalling how he narrowly escaped death in the tragic incident, Ifeanyi Eze, a survivor said:

“I was somewhere that fateful morning when my wife called me on phone to inform me that my brother, Oluchi Eze, and seven other persons were trapped inside a tank. I rushed down and went to the scene of the incident. I climbed halfway into the tank and found these young men already weak and suffocating. I tied a rope round the chest of one of them and asked people watching from on top of the tank to pull the rope but unfortunately, the rope was not strong enough and the weight of the victim got it torn. I then decided to climb out of the tank because I was already suffocating because of the generator fume inside the tank. When I got out, I couldn’t ‘get’ myself (I felt dizzy and disoriented) and people around the scene rushed me to a nearby hospital for treatment.”

He further explained: “When I was inside the tank, I discovered that I was experiencing peppery sensation all over my body together with a feeling of suffocation. I believe those people died because of suffocation because when I went inside the tank, I saw that the water level was ankle deep. So, they couldn’t have drowned inside the tank.”

Electrical engineer weighs in on possible cause of death

Prof. Emenike Ejioogu of Department of Electrical Engineering, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, believes that from the account given by the survivor, the deaths could have been caused by no other thing but carbon monoxide. “The carbon from the mechanical pumping machine which was inside the underground tank contains all kinds of

poisonous gas, which includes sulfuric oxide, particulate matter, carbon monoxide,” he explained while commenting on the possible cause of the tragedy.

“Carbon monoxide is the most dangerous. It is an odorless gas, when you breathe it. It goes to occupy the space of oxygen in your lungs and gradually you begin to suffocate without knowing it. As long as the water pumping machine was on and releasing carbon monoxide inside the underground tank which has one small opening such tragedy was bound to happen. The carbon monoxide would have pushed out the oxygen, creating a poisonous environment inside the tank. So, anybody inside the tank that moment is breathing in carbon monoxide plus the other gases which cause suffocation.

“Anybody who gets into the tank to rescue a dying person automatically would breathe in the carbon monoxide, because the oxygen that was in their lungs before the person enter into the tank finishes and the only thing the person was breathing was the dangerous carbon monoxide. Once the brain doesn’t have oxygen the person dies. So, that could be the cause of the deaths.”

Speaking further on the incident, Prof. Ejiogu advised, that “whenever such ugly incident occurs the best thing to do is to quickly find a way to get more opening to the tank so that the carbon monoxide will find an exit way thereby giving way for oxygen to ventilate in. The first aid to any person trapped in such situation is to be give mouth-to-mouth oxygen, by closing the nose and forcing air in through the person mouth before rushing the person to the nearest hospital. The danger of oxygen being denied to a normal human being is that within a few minutes the brain will begin to die.”

Father of the water tank’s owner reacts

Commenting on Onu’s complaint about the owner of the tank’s supposed insensitivity, he said: “Stephen Mamah, the owner of the tank has promised to give N100,000 and a coffin each for the burial of the eight dead young boys. But what is N100, 000 compare to the life of a person?” When our reporter visited Mamah, he did not meet him and therefore was unable to have a chat with him, but his father, Alfred, narrated how he learnt about the incident.

His words: “It was around 3:30 pm that fateful day that one of my children came to my workplace to inform me that my son’s labourers have been trapped. Earlier before my son left for Nsukka town that morning he told me he warned the deceased labourers not to go inside the tank but instead to follow him back to his hometown Eha-Amufu. I was very surprised when I was told me that some labourers have been trapped inside the tank.”

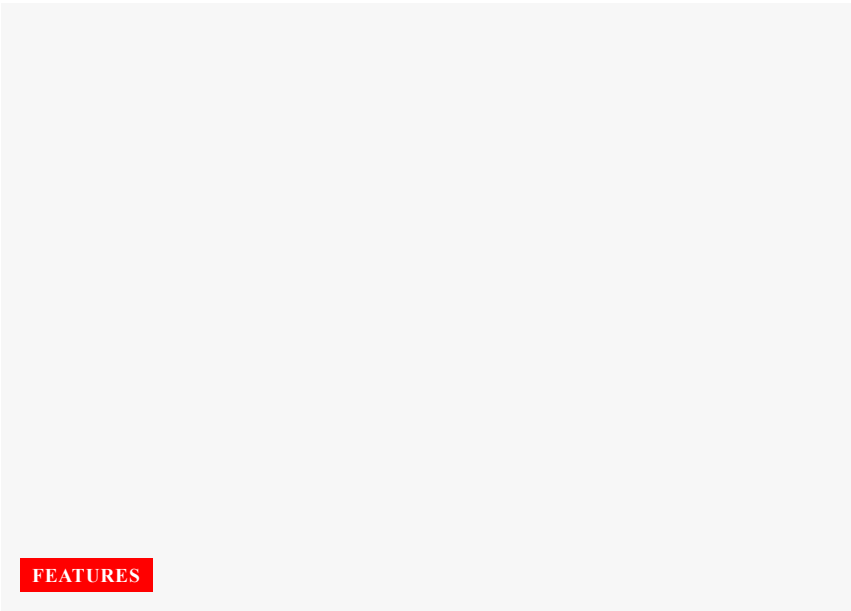
The man who is a security man at Destiny Microfinance Bank, Ogurute, told our reporter that when he rushed back home that afternoon, he was shocked to discover that eight young boys have died inside the tank. “When my son Stephen came back from Nsukka, he was picked up by the police. He was taken to Enugu, the state capital. We are planning to hold the burial of the labourers by the end of this August. We are still devastated by the death of these young men.”

Saturday Sun learnt that the dead bodies have been deposited at Ogrute Mortuary while the burial had been scheduled to hold on August 22, 2019.



Rapheal

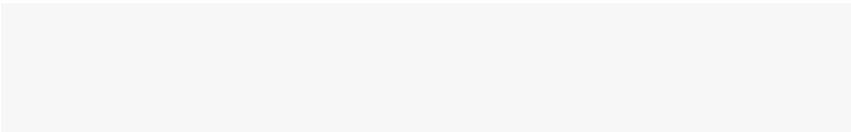
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