

Bayelsa: 20 burnt to death in boat mishap

Local government boss mourns

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From Femi Folaranmi, *Yenagoa*

Twenty victims are confirmed dead in a Wednesday evening boat mishap at Ezetu 1 River, Southern Ijaw Local Government of Bayelsa State.

Investigations revealed that the boat popularly called 'Denghe market Boat' is a long big boat that sets sail on Monday and moves from community to community picking traders to arrive in Yenagoa every Thursday.

The peculiarity of the boat allows its passengers to cook and eat in the boat till it gets to its final destination.

Investigations revealed that while in the middle of the river, the boat engine exploded and fire engulfed the wooden boat.

The explosion was said to have immediately burnt the 20 people to death while others were said to have jumped into the river before the boat eventually sank.

Police spokesman in Bayelsa State, ASP Musa Muhammed, who confirmed the incident to newsmen on Thursday, said rescue operations are ongoing to recover the drowned passengers of the ill-fated boat.

“The local boat traveling from Ekeni community in Southern Ijaw to Yenagoa had a mishap and sank, about 20 persons were reported to have lost their lives, and efforts are ongoing to recover their corpses,” he said.

The chairman of the Maritime Workers Union in Bayelsa State, Mr Ipgansi Ogoniba, who also confirmed the boat accident said the number of casualties cannot be ascertained because the search operation is ongoing.

According to him, the rescue team from the union that went to the scene was able to rescue one corpse late in the evening on Wednesday.

“The boat left Ezetu 1 community around 3 pm as they were coming to Okubie, the onboard engine they were using caught fire and exploded, so the boat got burnt and sank, some of the people on board were drowned in the water, there was no network at that point to reach the rescue team from Yenagoa because that wooden boat always takes about 18 hours to reach Yenagoa from that point, while speedboat takes like 5 hours.”

The chairperson of the Association of Coastal and Waterways Communities of Nigeria in Bayelsa state Comrade Odede Dinikpete Tina, ascribed the larger number of casualties to the inability of the boat operators in the state to stick to safety protocols especially wearing life jackets while onboard.

Tina urged the state government to intensify efforts to link more coastal communities with roads.

According to her, despite several sensitisation, the association has carried out on safety protocols, people traveling on waterways still refuse to wear life jackets.

Meanwhile, the executive chairman of Southern Ijaw Local Government, Hon Target Segibo has mourned the loss of lives, calling on maritime officials and security agencies to be strict on compliance with maritime rules by boat operators.

He warned operators of the boat to place utmost value on the safety of lives and property by providing life jackets to all passengers and ensuring that their vessels are in good condition before every trip.