

108 Feared Dead as Illegal Refinery Explodes in Imo

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Blessing Ibunge

No fewer than 108 people were killed on Friday night, while several vehicles were burnt after an illegal refinery exploded at Abaezi forest in the Ohaji-Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State.

THISDAY gathered that the fire incident was caused by illegal refining activities at a border community between Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State and Ohaji Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State. The Imo State Government has described the explosion as an act of economic sabotage.

Governor Hope Uzodinma said this while fielding questions from journalists at an event in the state, however, commiserated with the families of those who lost their lives in the explosion.

The governor who said the incident was unfortunate, advised indigenes of the state to stay away from illegal oil bunkering. Also commenting on the ugly development, the state Commissioner for Petroleum Resources, Goodluck Opiah, who represented Governor Uzodinma of Imo State during his visit to the scene, said the fire consumed the lives of so many youths.

He said: "At the moment, I can't confirm the number of the deceased because many family members have removed the corpses of so many others."

Opiah said Okenze Onyewoke, the owner of the illegal refinery, had been declared wanted by the state government.

He said: "Apart from this calamity, the act has destroyed the aquatic life of the community. Our people before now are predominantly farmers and fishermen.

The Rivers State Command of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) has also expressed worries over the fire incident.

In a statement issued yesterday, the NSCDC Public Relations Officer in the state, Olufemi Ayodele, confirmed that over 100 persons died in the incident.

Ayodele stated: "The state Commandant of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, Rivers State Command, Abu Tambuwal, said the command condemns all acts of sabotaging the economy of the nation, environmental degradation, fire outbreak through oil bunkering activities.

"He affirmed that the command under his watch will not leave any stone unturned in the fight against illegal dealings in petroleum products, oil theft and illegal bunkering activities.

"While commiserating with the families and loved ones of the bereaved, Tambuwal commended the efforts of the Nigerian Army, Department of State Services (DSS), Nigeria Police and the NSCDC who carried out emergency response, crowd control and adequate security in the environment to prevent nefarious activities by hoodlums."

When the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) visited the site, unidentified burnt bodies littered the area even as family members were seen evacuating the remains of their loved ones.

A community leader and President-General of the Supreme Council of Oil and Gas Producing Areas in Imo, Chief Collins

Ajie, described the incident as ‘unfortunate’.

“It is unfortunate. A tragedy no one dreamt of where about 108 people got burnt beyond recognition due to illegal oil bunkering.

“The state and federal governments should step up efforts to stop this illegal bunkering because it has claimed many lives from Ohaji/Egbema and other Niger Delta areas.

“It’s shocking to see these bodies lying down here. Most of them are breadwinners of their families. Most of them are young promising people, undergraduates and graduates,” he said.

The community leader noted that the Imo State Government had some time ago made efforts to stop this illegal business, but it yielded no fruit.

According to him, some arrests were made, and some trucks and some boats were impounded and burnt, yet it had not been able put the situation under control perhaps as a result of the involvement of prominent individuals in the illegal trade. He advised the state and federal governments to step up efforts at ending the illegal business.

“On our way coming, you could count about 34 checking points awaiting the illegal bunkers and traders. So, if we have that figure and this illegal bunkering continued daily, then they have questions to answer,” he said.

Efforts to get official confirmation of the incident from the state Police Public Relations Officer, Mr Mike Abattam, proved abortive as he didn’t respond to calls put across to him

Earlier, an alert statement by a civil society group, Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre (YEAC), revealed that the explosion also burnt several vehicles that were waiting to buy the illegal product.

The Executive Director of YEAC, Fyneface Dumnamene Fyneface, revealed that “Photographs and short videos sent to Advocacy Centre showed several dead bodies, most of them burnt beyond recognition on the ground with those of others who may have been attempting to run from the fire and explosion hanging on some trees branches.”

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