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Gov Udom escapes, over 100 die as church collapses in Uyo

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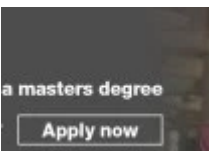
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Tragedy struck in Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital yesterday when more than 100 worshippers allegedly died when a church building under construction collapsed on them, as Governor Udom Emmanuel was saved by his security aide. But Governor Emmanuel's Aide de Camp, DSP Abimiko Linus, who rescued him was not lucky as he, the Commissioner for Information Mr. Charles Udoh, Co-ordinator of his campaign organisation, Andrew Uwanta and



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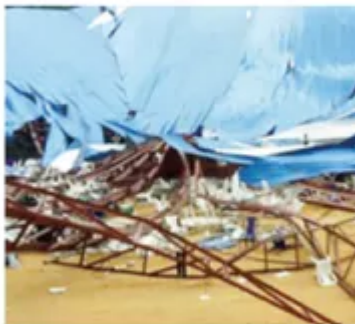
the governor's Chief Press Secretary, Mr. Ekerete Udoh, sustained life-threatening injuries.

The incident occurred at the Reigners' Bible Church where he attended the Bishopric Enthronement of the church's founder, Apostle Akan Weeks, located along Uyo Village Road. A lawmaker, Mr. Emmanuel Bassey, who represents Ini Constituency in the state House of Assembly was also injured. It is also confirmed that an official of the DSS, Mr. Ernest, met his untimely death after helping to whisk away the governor from the hall. He suddenly returned to pick the official seat of the governor from the hall and was hit by the collapsing roof metals.

Eye witness told Sunday Telegraph that while the event was ongoing (after the offering session), the church building's metal roof which is still under construction collapsed abruptly killing many of worshippers and bringing the event to an abrupt end.



Church leaders before the collapse



A section of the collapsed church

Governor Emmanuel, who was seated on the podium along with other dignitaries, was a little lucky as he

was snatched away by his ADC in the midst of the



confusion, but the ADC sustained injuries in the process, an usher in the church said.

“The seat on which the governor sat during the event was completely destroyed by a heavy metal from the debris”, said the usher who narrowly escaped death too.

As at the time of filing in this report, it was confirmed that Governor Udom is hale and hearty and was seen supervising rescue operations but Ekerete Udoh worshipper is presently taking treatment in an undisclosed hospital in Uyo.

Eye witnesses confirmed to Sunday Telegraph that many lost their lives while others who sustained various degrees of injuries were being evacuated from the collapsed building and rushed to hospitals. “Several dead bodies have been taken to the mortuary in ambulances and members of the Federal Road Safety Corps have lost count of the bodies right now”, a church security officer identified as Ime Ekpo told Sunday Telegraph The specific number of casualties is still unknown said a top pastor of the church when confronted by our correspondent at the scene.

He said: “scores were injured, others have lost their lives while lots of others are still trapped in the building.” As at the time of filing this report, about four cranes have been deployed by Julius Berger construction firm to help rescue



victims who were trapped under the heavy wreckage and mostly mangled bodies could be seen from a distance.

It took over four hours before any meaningful rescue could start as thousands of Uyo residents emptied into the church Arena upon hearing the news of the collapsed church building. Security agents including the military, police and NSCDC tried tirelessly to control the crowd and cordon off the arena as rescue operation efforts continued.

The Red Cross officials were on hand attending to some victims with minor injuries but unconfirmed reports had it that some hospitals (especially St Luke's Hospital, Anua and Specialist Hospital, Itam) have refused to attend to the victims. The governor in an interview with journalists said the collapse was caused by shoddy and hasty construction of the building aimed at putting up a befitting structure for the ordination.

Other engineers who visited the scene blamed the tragedy on the sub-standard materials used by the church project engineers and builders, stressing that the weight of the metal roofing was too enormous for the poor block work and small rods used in pillars and beam of the auditorium. Sunday Telegraph gathered from an Uyo capital city development official who pleaded anonymity that there was no approval for the building from government, with authorities saying the contractors must be brought to give explanation.



Meanwhile Akwa Ibom State Police Commissioner, Mr. Murtala Usman Mani visited the scene of the incident and called for calm and prayers for the victims. Mani who spoke through the State Police Public Relations Officer, ASP Cordelia Nwawe, said the State Police Command had provided adequate security around the vicinity to ensure smooth operations.

She declined to say the exact number of dead worshippers at the time of filing this report, but noted that adequate security will continue to be provided around the area until the rescue operations were over and warned miscreants to stay away from the area. National Emergency Management Agency could not give actual casualty figure, stating that many hospitals were still treating critically injured victims.

But a source at the scene said the entire choristers in the church were almost wiped off while scores of corpses littered the ground before being taken into the morgue. Another source, a medical doctor at the University of Uyo Teaching Hospital said over 150 corpses have been brought to the morgue from the scene.

Akwa Ibom govt consoles victims

The Akwa Ibom State Government has commiserated with the families of the victims. According to a statement from the office of the Chief Press Secretary said, “The Governor



of Akwa Ibom State, Mr. Udom Emmanuel, was present at the church service during the incident and thereafter personally supervised rescue operations and evacuation of the injured to the hospital. The State Government will undertake the medical treatment of the victims”.

The statement stated that a high- powered panel of enquiry was being constituted to ascertain the immediate and remote cause of the collapse with a view to forestalling a re-occurrence of such incident and bring to book persons found to have compromised professional standards in the construction of the building. The Government of Akwa Ibom State appealed to citizens of the state to remain calm, pray for those injured and avoid undue speculation as the situation is being given the best possible attention.

The governor said the state was very devastated by this monumental tragedy, and would do everything possible to bring those who are involved in any act of negligence respecting the incident to book which culminated in the incident to book to avoid a reoccurrence.

PFN offers assistance

The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) in Akwa Ibom State urged all churches to take special offerings for medical assistance to all those injured in the incident and send same to the Reigners’ Bible Church. The State Chairman, Dr.



Sylvanus Ukafia, in a statement made available to Sunday Telegraph appealed to church members who could to donate blood, where necessary, to those in the hospital and make other donations as might be required in the course of the treatment of those injured.

“The Pentecostal Community shares the pain of Reigners’ Bible Church on the sad event of the collapse of its building during the Bishopric Ordination of its presiding pastor, Bishop- Elect Akan Weeks, and stand with them in prayers and support”. The PFN urges all Pentecostal churches in the state in particular and Nigeria in general to hold special prayers for the Church in their services on Sunday.. “We assure Reigner’s Bible Church that they are in our thoughts and prayers. We pray for the comfort of the Holy Spirit and may this cloud of pain give way to a new dawn of hope for the church,” PFN said.

NSE sets up probe panel

The Chairman of Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE), Uyo Branch, Engr. (Amb) Mfon Udoikpong has directed the members of Prevention, Investigation and Failure Analysis Committee of NSE , led by Engr. Prof. Charles Uyo, to visit the site and commence comprehensive investigation into the disaster.

