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WITH AGENCY REPORTS

**A** Friday night explosion that occurred at an illegal oil bunkering site in Imo has left over 100 people dead.

A Correspondent of the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), who visited the site at the boundary between Abacheke and Abezi community in Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area on Saturday, gathered that the explosion occurred at about 8:00 p.m.

Unidentified burnt bodies littered the area even as family members were seen moving away 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 are about 108 people got burnt beyond recognition due to illegal oil bunkering.

"The state and Federal Governments should step up efforts to stop this il-

# Illegal bunkering: Explosion kills over 100 people in Imo

## • Govt declares owner of refinery wanted

legal 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 bread winners of their families. Most of them are young promising people, undergraduates and graduates," he said.

The community leader noted that the Imo 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 impounded and burnt, yet it had not been able put the situation under control perhaps as a result of the involvement of high calibre individuals involved 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 check points awaiting the illegal bunkerers and traders. So, if we have that figure and this illegal bunkering continued on a daily basis, then they have questions to answer," he said.

Also speaking, Mr David Chibuike lamented that he was at the site in search of the remains of his elder sister.

"I heard the information about the incident and I had to rush down because my sister, who was married to someone in this community, was involved.

"I came to identify her body but couldn't recognize her here," he said while shedding tears.

He also called on government and security agencies to put an end to the illegal bunkering to

prevent such huge loss of lives.

A youth from Abacheke community, Mr. Desmond Ajie, who expressed sadness over the development, expressed concern over the inability of community leaders and security agents to end illegal bunkering in the area.

"There is conspiracy of silence by both those who call themselves leaders and security agencies because they failed to arrest this issue.

"It is unfortunate that those with capacity to put an end to this have failed," he said.

Vehicles numbering about six were also destroyed in the inferno that has thrown the community into gloom.

At the scene of the tragedy, the charred remains of about 60 bodies were still left behind while

people were uncertain if about 25 others rescued and rushed to hospital would survive.

Consequently, government has declared the owner of the illegal refinery, Okenze Onyenwoke wanted.

This was disclosed by the Commissioner for Petroleum Resources, Goodluck Opiah, who also advised the suspect whom he said was on the run to hand himself over to law enforcement at the nearest police station.

The Commissioner said: "This is a sad and unfortunate development. This ugly incident was avoidable and it is inexcusable and unpardonable. This is why the Imo State government declared the prime suspect in this matter, Okenze Onyenwoke wanted. He owns this illegal refinery and I advice him to hand himself over

to the police wherever he is.

"This is wickedness. This is economic sabotage and it is destroying our youths and taking their minds away from honest and decent work. I urge our young men to shun this kind of illegitimate business. There are so many legitimate businesses one could do and make genuine money."

A community source, who said he was among the first responder and identified himself as Ejikeme Odunka, said: "There are no survivors, not a single person. Those who were rescued yesterday and rushed to the hospital have all died this morning. The casualty figure is over 100. It is a gory tragedy. You can see people running helter skelter trying to identify their loved ones but unfortunately the victims were burnt to an unrecognizable char."