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15 persons feared dead, several injured as explosion rocks Onitsha Bridge Head market

About 15 traders and artisans were feared dead yesterday and several persons so far injured following an explosion that rocked the popular Onitsha drug market, popularly known as Ogbogu International Market, Bridge Head, Onitsha, Anambra State.

The incident, which started at about 12noon, destroyed goods and buildings estimated at over N10 billion; according to a trader in the market, Mr Amobi Okanume.

Okanume, who said that this was the first time the market was suffering fire disaster, added that the fire caused much damage before the arrival of fire fighters from Onitsha and the neighbouring Asaba in Delta State.

Another trader in the market simply known as Ozigi, claimed that the fire started when an explosion occurred in one of the buildings at the Chemical Line of the Market.

He said, "I was in the market at about 11am, when an explosion occurred, and every trader started running helter skelter, scampering for safety.

"The explosion sparked fire that affected over 70 shops, destroying goods worth several billions of naira. Apart from goods and prop-

erty, about 5 persons - 4 men and a woman were trapped; and they are not yet rescued as we speak," he narrated.

As at the time our reporter arrived at the scene of the incident, many traders were stranded, some wailing, some evacuating their goods in trucks and vehicles.

Getting wind of the incident, Chairman of Onitsha South Local Government Area, Mr Emeka Orji stormed the area with members of his staff and contacted the Anambra State Fire Service led by Martin Agbili who deplored officers and men of the department from Okpoko in Ogharu Local Government Area and that of Asaba in Delta State who took over the market.

Orji also contacted the Divisional Police Officer, DPO, Fegge, Rabi Garuba, who deployed officers and men to the market to guarantee security of goods and other properties belonging to the traders.

According to one of the traders who spoke to this reporter, Mr Nweke Uchenna; "We were at our shops as usual when we heard a loud noise like a bomb blast and we saw tick smoke from some shops

upstairs and everyone started running for safety."

"Then people started shouting for help and we saw people carrying bodies of people from those shops that were on fire and some were burnt pretty badly, while some seem to have been suffocated by the smoke and the stampede.

"We don't know how much that have been lost to the fire, but it can be estimated at N 850 million to about N1 billion, because the goods are strong chemical products that are highly inflatable," he said.

Speaking on the incident, the Onitsha South Council Chairman, Mr Emeka Orji said that the incident was unfortunate, adding that the congested market almost made it difficult for officers and men of the Anambra Fire Service to put off the fire.

"We are happy that the Anambra State Fire Service came on time to prevent the inferno from going deep into the market.

"Our proactive measures



A section of the market

a bout fire outbreak also paid off, because we had put in place firefighting gadgets in some lines and that was what the traders and market task force team were using to fight the fire before the Anambra State Fire Service came in," he said.

Orji however noted that, "the number of deaths could not be ascertained as well as the number of those injured, but those injured have been rushed to the medical facilities around the area and we are happy that most of them are responding to treatment," he said.

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