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Hundreds Die in Another Pipeline Fire

• **Obasanjo: I'm deeply saddened -It's shameful, says Tinubu**

By Chika Amanze-Nwachuku, Deji Elumoye, Eugene Agha in Lagos and Josephine Lohor in Abuja, 12.27.2006

An explosion at a vandalised oil pipeline in Awori area of Abule Egba, a Lagos suburb, yesterday started a fire that killed hundreds of people.

Several others who sustained various degrees of burns have been admitted at either private hospitals in the area or the Ikeja General Hospital.

President Olusegun Oba-sanjo said he was deeply saddened by the loss of lives in the latest incident and advised Nigerians against vandalisation of oil pipelines.

But Lagos state governor, Senator Bola Tinubu, who described the incident as an evidence of poverty in the country said it was shameful.

At least, over 250 charred bodies, including that of a woman with a baby strapped to her back, littered the scene of the explosion when THISDAY arrived there at about 9.45am. Unconfirmed reports however said no fewer than 1000 people might have been killed.

Some residents who spoke to newsmen at the scene confirmed that the vandals have been siphoning fuel from the punctured pipeline in the last three days until yesterday when luck ran out on them.

Sources said an NNPC pipeline, which runs through the village via Ipaja and then to Ejigbo had been vandalised by unknown vandals on the eve of Christmas.

The news of petroleum product being scooped soon filtered into the village and more and more people joined in the illegal act which continued from Christmas day till the early hours of yesterday when the disaster struck.

Group Managing Director, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Engr. Funsho Kupolokun, who visited the scene at about 12.45pm, accompanied by Dr. Levi Ajuonuma, General Manager, Group Public Affairs Division, confirmed that the corporation was informed about the vandalisation and it alerted the police who could not do much.

He disclosed that President Obasanjo had directed that the entire pipelines from Lagos to Mosimi be replaced, with the pipelines buried deeper to prevent further vandalisation by miscreants, but that it would take the corporation about one year to do the replacements.

The NNPC boss, stated that the corporation, before now, had been receiving reports of vandalisation of petroleum pipelines in that area and instructed the police to be patrolling the area.

Lagos State Commissioner of Police (CP), Mr. Emmanuel Adebayo, who arrived the scene at about 10am in the company of some officers of the command and the Police Area Commander, Mrs. Bose Dawodu could not ascertain the number of casualties, but stated that the police were there on time and have been on the ground to ensure that there was no breakdown of law and order.

The CP said about 500 officers and men were already on the ground but assured that 3000 more would be deployed in the area.

A resident of that area, who identified himself as Bode Kuforiji told journalists that he received the news that the vandals were at work at about 1am.

He said on arrival at the scene around 5am, he saw people, men and women scooping fuel from a punctured pipeline and alleged that some policemen were even among those scooping fuel before fire started at a few minutes before 8am

Kuforiji, who claimed to be a university lecturer also alleged that two petrol tankers stationed there overnight loaded fuel in the full glare of policemen.

The Chairman of Ojokoro Local Government, Moruf Adeola Adeafolabi also confirmed that as early as 5am, the two tankers had finished loading from the spot.

He stated that the policemen whom he brought to the scene were attacked by the vandals, who were scooping fuel with jerry cans and buckets.

Afolabi argued that at least 3000 people may have died in the inferno as according to him about 600 of them were at the spot before fire broke out.

When THISDAY visited a nearby clinic, HamKad Hospital & Maternity, where nine of the survivors were hospitalised, the doctor in charge, Rahman Mudashiru stated that 14 of the victims walked into the hospital on their own.

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He said the nine persons on admission in his hospital sustained between 50-75 degree burns, while five others with over 100 degree burns were referred to the General Hospital and other victims with various degrees of burns were said to have been taken to the Lagos state Teaching Hospital.

An official of the Nigerian Red Cross Society, who briefed Kupolokun on his arrival confirmed that about 45 victims had been taken to the Lagos state Teaching Hospital, while more than 200 bodies were still at the scene.

He stated that the rescue team included fire fighters from the NNPC and the Lagos state fire service and assured that the operation would continue until the fire was completely put out.

A woman, whose identity was not immediately known explained that his son had left home in the early hours of yesterday without informing anybody of his mission.

She said it was after repeatedly calling his phone number and without a response that it dawned on her that he might have been consumed in the inferno.

A young man who wept at the scene said he lost three relatives to the fire incident.

On how the fire started, residents who pleaded anonymity stated that the explosion occurred while one of the vandals was trying to take a call.

They stated that the incident would have been averted if the police who were informed in good time had taken steps to do so.

At about 2.15pm when THISDAY left the scene, fire fighters from the NNPC were still battling to put off the fire. But a member of the team assured that the fire would be completely put out in few hours.

A press release, last night by NNPC's spokesman stated that the fire had been put out. Ajuonuma, who spoke with THISDAY at about 7.10pm, confirmed that "the fire was completely put out at about 45 minutes ago", that is, around 7.30pm, adding that once the damaged pipeline cools, repair work would commence in earnest, possibly today.

He stated that the corporation cannot pump fuel now because the flow has been disrupted and called on Nigerians to join in safeguarding pipelines, pointing out that once they are damaged, supplies throughout the country would be affected.

Meanwhile, President Obasanjo yesterday said he was deeply saddened by the reported loss of scores of lives in the latest incident and urged Nigerians to report to constituted authorities suspicious movements around oil pipelines and installations.

The President stated that he was particularly distraught by the fact that once again, so many lives have been lost unnecessarily despite repeated warnings by government on the dangers and perils associated with tampering with oil pipelines.

While noting that the nation will indeed mourn the many victims of this very unfortunate incident, he added that everything needed to be done to avoid recurrence of such disasters in future.

He also advised that this could be achieved if all persons currently engaged in the immensely hazardous and illegal business of pipeline vandalism take a giant leap by taking up gainful and legitimate employment elsewhere.

While disclosing that the Federal Government will continue to do everything possible to prevent the vandalism of oil pipelines and the grave dangers that go with it, he urged all Nigerians to do their patriotic duty by immediately reporting any such incidents that come to their attention before they culminate in another tragedy such as the one that has just occurred.

Also, Governor Bola Tinubu of Lagos state arrived the scene at about 3.30pm and sympathised with the people but described the incident as an evidence of poverty in the country.

He blamed officials of NNPC and Federal Government for their neglect of oil pipelines across the nation, which had made it vulnerable to vandalism.

He said the fire disaster was a reflection of Federal Government's neglect of Nigerian masses.

His words: "You can see the shame of our nation. A country that is ranked the 8th largest producer of oil in the world is still made to suffer this kind of hardship. You can see what hunger has turned our people into. We need to be concerned about the life of people but not money. It is a sign of poverty."

"I have requested several times from the FG that these pipelines should be kept away from where they are vulnerable to the public access. It is not done, we should concern ourselves more about saving life and not making money.

"But how do we fight this menace, how do we stop it? Except we fight unemployment, except we fight hopelessness in the country, except we do things right in a good manner", he stated.

Permanent Secretary, Lagos State Ministry of Health, Dr. Jide Idris, while addressing the governor on the number of survivors under intensive care said 60 people have been admitted in various hospitals in the state.

He said survivors were in critical condition as they all sustained 70 per cent secondary degree burns.

He stated that 18 people had been admitted at Isolo hospital, 24 in Lagos University Teaching Hospital, 13 in General Hospital, Lagos and four in Gbagada hospital.

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