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<a href="#">Behind The News</a>
<a href="#">International</a>
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<a href="#">Comment</a>
<a href="#">Letters</a>
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<a href="#">Education</a>
<a href="#">Development</a>
<a href="#">BackPage Extra</a>
<a href="#">THISDAY Saturday</a>
<a href="#">THISDAY Sunday</a>
<a href="#">ARCHIVE</a>

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## One Christmas and 45 Funerals...

By Eugene Agha, Fidelia Okwuonu in Lagos and Patrick Ugeh in Abuja, 12.27.2007

It was yet another Christmas last Tuesday. It was also another experience with tragedy. Forty-five of those who chose to savour the yuletide season in different way – scooping petrol from a damaged pipeline – lost their lives.

The dead included children, men and women of different ages.

They lost their lives when a Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) pipeline exploded at Aba-agbo village, Iru near Victoria Island, Lagos.

The victims of the explosion were all given mass burial yesterday at the scene of the fire.

The burial took place in the early hours of yesterday in the village.

Lagos State Commissioner for Health, Dr Jide Idris, said the victims were buried to prevent epidemics in the affected area, adding that the state health officials had also commenced fumigation of the affected coast-line.

He appealed to the Federal Government and the NNPC to encase the pipelines and warned Lagos residents to desist from scooping fuel from vandalised pipelines as history had shown that the effects had always been catastrophic.

The Federal Government described the vandalisation of pipelines conveying petroleum products by thieves as worrisome and warned that it would no longer tolerate the criminal act.

Yesterday, the people of Aba-gbo, which lie on the creeks on the outskirts of Lagos, were still going about their daily chores as if oblivious of what had happened.

They were reluctant to attend to newshounds' enquiries about the tragic incident.

Debris left behind by the fire, which has since been put out, was still all over the place when THISDAY visited the place yesterday.

Left behind at the scene were some jerry-cans, tied together in bunches, which littered the bushes around the scene of the explosion.

There were also some pipes and funnels apparently used to fill the jerry-cans, some of which had melted.

The area wore a perfume of fuel and smoke still billowing from tree stumps.

There was no immediate indication as to what had caused the fire, which left burnt palm trees and other trees all over the place.

But it was learnt that pipeline vandals had earlier cut open a section of the pipeline ferrying refined petroleum products from the Atlas Cove Jetty, Lagos, to depots in the South-West part of the country and stole large quantities of the products.

When the villages found the vandalised pipelines open and gushing out petroleum products, some of them decided to help themselves.

Rescue workers, which included, policemen from the Lagos State Police Command, state government officials, Nigerian Red Cross Society and some fishermen were still searching for more bodies.

Charred clothing scattered all over the bushes indicate perhaps that some of those caught in the blaze may have managed to pull off their burning oil-soaked dresses as they fled.

THISDAY saw that part of the surface covering the pipeline was dug, laying bare a punctured pipeline, which indicated that the vandalisation must have been well-organised.

Some of the villagers alleged that those involved belong to the same cartel of wealthy individuals who go to the villages to recruit peasants to do the actual scooping for them. The business of scooping fuel, they added, was an exclusive reserve of the high and mighty.

A few hundred metres from the scene of the fire, there were also a series of holes dug into the sand which seemed to indicate earlier unsuccessful attempts by vandals to locate the pipeline.

But the Baale of Aba-agbo Village, Chief Nurudeen Idowu, exonerated the people of the village from pipeline vandalism.

Speaking with THISDAY in his palace, the chief said when he heard the explosion in the early hours of Christmas, he asked his subjects to alert security agents and NNPC. According to him, the bodies of the victims had been hastily buried at the scene of the explosion, in three mass graves.

He described the incident as the handwork of strangers who came into the village on the eve of the Christmas, hiding under the canopy of the festive period to carry out their nefarious activity.

He lamented that the village had never witnessed a case of pipeline explosion in the past.

In line with tradition which forbids traditional rulers from seeing dead bodies, Idowu said though he was not at the burial, he added, however, that he was not aware that any of his subjects died in the explosion.

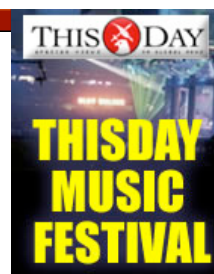
The Minister of Information and Communications, Chief John Odey, said: "This present administration is not only going to govern in line with the provision of our laws, the government is equally determined to ensure maximum protection for lives and properties of Nigerians from criminal elements.

"The Federal Government can no longer tolerate acts of vandalism to our national infrastructure".

He stated that the Federal Government was shocked and saddened by the "unfortunate

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news" of the death that "occurred in the suburb of Lagos as a result of illegal activities of pipeline vandals."

Odey said this was particularly so in view of the extensive efforts of the present administration to ensure safety of life and property of all Nigerians irrespective of their status in the society.

"At a time when Nigerians were savouring the peace and joy of the Yuletide season, it is sad that a group of criminals could go about to engage in acts that could slow down our development," he said.

The minister remarked that it was unfortunate that some people could still attempt to embark on criminal activities by bursting petroleum product pipelines in order to make ill-gotten money.

He urged all Nigerians to realise that optimal security of lives and properties could only be achieved when they individually and collectively obey the laws of the land and refrain from criminal activities.

He expressed the Federal Government's sympathy to the families of those who lost their loved ones in Tuesday's pipeline fire and urged the family heads to always control their wards to be law-abiding as "ignorance of the law cannot be an excuse," assuring Nigerians of the Federal government's resolve to eradicate similar incidents.

The Group General Manager, Public Affairs of NNPC, Mr. Levi Ajunoma, described the incident as unfortunate.

He told THISDAY in an interview, "We regret the loss of lives and we have several times that insisted vandalism is a dangerous practice and anybody who is engaging in this practice should desist from it.

"Any one who is involved in this act is endangering himself and the nation. We are really bitter about the loss of lives and we are using this opportunity to appeal to communities that live near the NNPC pipeline to give the right of way, to please cooperate with the corporation. And for those communities that have shown cooperation up to this point, we also want to say we are grateful."

According to him, "Some warlords and rich people in the society are behind this thing. They are warlords and not villagers. Poor men cannot afford the cost of the number of plastic gallons at the scene of the incident. They planned this thing in advance before buying this number of containers. They know they will carry out such operation."

He maintained that the villagers became the scape goats because they did not know the consequences of scooping fuel.

According to him, "The proper thing is for the villagers to report such incidents to the NNPC and security agents.

Giving an insight into the corporation's loss in the past years to vandalism, he said the NNPC suffered about 971 cases of pipeline vandalism in 2004, 2,258 in 2005 and 2,912 cases in 2006 with a substantial number this year.

Since the Jesse pipeline fire incident of October 1998 in which over 1,000 people were burnt to death, the country has been treated to a macabre dance of death orchestrated by vandals.

Oil explosions are frequent in Nigeria, Africa's biggest producer of crude, in part because of poor pipeline maintenance and the activities of thieves who vandalise pipelines to siphon off petrol and sell it on the black market.

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