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## Pipeline Explosion: Lagos Govt Must Pay N97bn Compensation - NNPC

By Udeme Clement-Ogbuanu, 11.30.2008

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The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) said at the weekend that the Lagos State Government would have to pay the sum of N97 billion as compensation demanded by the victims of Ijegan Pipeline Fire.

The Corporation had also distanced itself from payment of any claim saying that the rupture of the NNPC pipeline which led to the explosion that claimed over 100 lives in Ijegan Community in Lagos was caused by the Lagos State contractor, HITECH Construction Company Limited. In that capacity, it held, the state government must pay for the damages.

The Group General Manager, Public Affairs Division of NNPC, Dr. Levi Ajuonuma, made this known in a telephone interview with THISDAY over the weekend.

He stressed that there was clear evidence to show that the pipeline explosion which led to the fire disaster that claimed innocent lives and properties worth millions of naira was caused by Lagos State.

"The rupture was not caused by NNPC. Lagos cannot break our pipeline and the people are asking us to pay compensation", he maintained.

Ajuonuma lamented that NNPC had incurred huge economic losses as a result of pipeline rupture at different circumstances, and such incidents also disrupted appropriate supply of petroleum products in the country.

Ijegan fire victims had dragged Lagos State Government, HITECH Construction Company Limited and NNPC to court over what they described as exemplary damages, breach of statutory duties and wrongful conduct, which they said led to the inferno in their community. In their claim, the victims accused NNPC of not complying with international best practices and acceptable standard which requires that pipelines must be laid 2.5 meter deep into the ground and should also be properly covered with concrete slabs to prevent easy access that could lead to rupture and possible explosion.

They accused the Lagos State government of authorising HITECH, its contractor to start construction work on the site within their territory without providing them with the land map with necessary details on the existence of pipeline in the community.

They also said that the construction company deliberately ruptured the pipeline ignoring warning by the people around who alerted the workers about the existence of pipeline in the area.

When THISDAY visited the community, some of the people also complained that aside from loss of lives, properties and physical disability which some victims suffered, the fire disaster also consumed their cultural antiquities and shrines.

However, the Minister of Petroleum, Odein Ajumogobia, recently said that demolition of houses in some parts of Lagos State near NNPC pipeline was a welcome development as such structures pose great danger and could trigger pipeline explosion at the slightest mistake.

Ajumogobia, who visited the scene of the explosion, said some of the houses within the Ijegan community encroached on NNPC Right of Way (RoW). He said, "There is what is called NNPC Right of Way (RoW), which states that structures must not be built close to petroleum pipelines to prevent pipeline rupture and people having easy access to the pipelines."

He expressed concern that people no longer respect NNPC RoW as they still put illegal structures very close to petrol pipelines notwithstanding the warning.

He emphasised that pipeline explosion, which often lead to fire outbreak and loss of innocent lives is a serious tragedy and could be avoided if illegal structures are not allowed on petroleum pipelines in any part of the country.

"Such structures are illegal because they encroached on the NNPC Right of Way and we can not continue like this, so we must take a bold step to do the right thing in order to achieve economic growth and development in our country", he stressed.

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