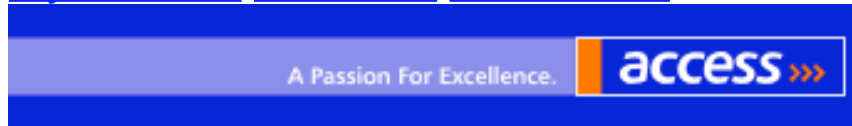


Friday 16 September, 2011 Updated 15:29

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Abuja Blast: Death Toll Hits 23

29 Aug 2011

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UN House in Abuja

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By Tokunbo Adedoya in New York, Ahamefula Ogbu, Onyebuchi Ezigbo and Paul Obi in Abuja

Federal Government confirmed yesterday that the death toll in last Friday's attack on the UN House

in Abuja had risen from 18 to 23.

The UN had said nine members of its staff died in the attack, while also disclosing that its head of safety and security, Gregory Starr, was already in Nigeria to lead investigation into the bombing.

The UN also confirmed 23 died and 81 were injured in the terrorist act but did not disclose the identities of its staff who were affected. The global body said although nine of its staff had been confirmed dead, it could still review the figure as the picture becomes clearer in the days ahead.

Starr, who flew into the country with the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Dr. Asha-Rose Migiro, according to the acting deputy spokesperson for the secretary-general, Farhan Haq, was to carry out the probe that would afford the organisation the opportunity to learn how its defences were breached.

This is coming on the heels of Federal Government's pledge to provide alternative office accommodation for the UN as well as assist the organisation in the reconstruction of the building. Meanwhile, Country Director of World Health Organisation (WHO), Dr. David Okello, yesterday told journalists that he escaped death at the UN building by going for another assignment - the inauguration of two mobile clinics donated by a Korean motor company, Hyundai, to the Abuja Teaching Hospital, Gwagwalada.

He said it was on his way to Gwagwalada that he received a call informing him of the blast. Also, the Country Director, United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), Dr. Suomi Sakai, said she was inside the building when the blast occurred but was lucky to have survived the sad incident. A member of staff of UNICEF, Ahmed, was confirmed dead.

Speaking in New York on the blast, Haq, who explained that the building was considered well-defended, said the investigation would also help prevent a future attack.

"There were barricades and different gates around the UN. It is regarded as a well-defended building, and we will need to investigate how it was that the attackers managed to get past different levels of protection so that they could cause the damage that they did," Haq said.

While noting that the organisation had been increasing its security profile in a number of areas around the world to ensure buildings compliant with different potential threats, he said the attack was a sign that some attackers might be able to breach its defences.

Jonathan made the pledge to UN when Migiro dispatched to the country by the Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, over the bombing, visited him at the Presidential Villa, Abuja. Jonathan, who commended the good work of the organisation, said the provision of a temporary office block was to enable the UN to continue with what it had been doing for the country.

He commiserated with families and colleagues of those who lost their dear ones in the blast and assured the organisation that Nigeria would help to see to the evacuation of the remains of the dead to their countries of origin, while the wounded would be given adequate medical attention.

The president commended the professional manner in which Nigerians and foreign nationals conducted the rescue efforts which mitigated the dire effects of the blast. In her response, Migiro said she was in the country to assess the damage which she condemned as despicable, adding that it would not however deter the UN from its programme aimed at impacting humanity positively.

She commended Jonathan for offering to assist in dispatching their dead staff to their countries, as well as for the offer of temporary accommodation and reconstruction of their damaged building as it would assist them in continuing their programmes in Nigeria.

According to her, their officials would carry out an assessment of the damaged building and appropriately advise them on their next line of action.

"We have discussed the question of the terrorism bombing that happened at the UN facilities here. We have brought our appreciation to Mr. President and the people of Nigeria for the quick response that we got from the government, from the rescue team and also we shared our willingness to continue the work we have been doing that our people have just paid the ultimate prize for and we

also look forward to also see how we'll address some of the concerns that must have come up as a result of the attack," she said.

On whether the incident would lead to a review of its operations in Nigeria, she replied: "We will never be deterred; we believe in global peace; we believe in global security; we believe in development. And here in Nigeria, the people are working hard to improve their lives and the United Nations is here for that. And you should also remember that this attack is an attack on communities; it is an attack on families; it is not all about the United Nations. So, we will never be deterred. We will move on and the members of staff are ready to do that and the government is also ready to help us in continuing to do our business here in Nigeria and in the world."

Migiro also had meetings with medical teams, UN workers and Nigerian officials. She told journalists in Abuja that she was on ground to address the various issues that would arise.

"I am impressed with the treatment so far, but if there is need for them to get further treatment outside Nigeria, we will do that. It is not only the victims, it has affected all. Search and rescue teams are working together to arrest the impact of the saga.

"We got a thorough briefing from the government and the medical team here of what is happening. We see that a lot of energy has gone into addressing this crisis," she said.

While commenting on the extent of damage done, she said: "It is good to emphasise the fact that this tragedy is about people, about community and it has also affected a wide range of people that are working with the United Nations...We know they have family and dependents.

"This tragedy has affected their lives and it will never be the same. This attack is on all of us, as people, as community,"

Minister of Health, Prof. Onyebuchi Chukwu, confirmed that the death toll had risen to 23. He said that the response from all the rescue teams had been good while one person was still in critical condition at the Intensive Care Unit of the National Hospital.

"The response has been excellent. If this is what we mean by transformation, I think our response has really been transformed," he said. The minister likewise told journalists: "All sides, all the different groups were there at the rescue. That was very good. There was no problem. The hospitals have done very well in terms of response, especially the National Hospital and other Federal Capital Territory hospitals."

Meanwhile, former Head of State and presidential candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) in last April election, Maj-Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (rtd), has expressed dismay over what he called the poor and inadequate response by the Federal Government to the spate of

bombings and insecurity in the country.

Buhari, whose feelings were conveyed in a statement signed by his spokesman, Mr. Yinka Odumakin, yesterday condemned Friday's bomb attacks at the UN building in Abuja in which many lives were lost and several others wounded. In the statement, Buhari frowned on the "lazy official response" that had accompanied serial challenges to security in the country.

He said such portends serious danger to the country: "There has yet to be any coordinated response by the security forces in the country. It is unprofessional and incompetent for our security agencies to surrender to this omnibus Boko Haram as the only clue to every security challenge. What that means is that even foreign interest can enter Nigeria today and wreak havoc and issue a statement in the name of Boko Haram and we will bury our dead and life continues." Also, an umbrella organisation of all Nigerians residing in North and South America, Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation in the Americas (NIDOA), has condemned the attack.

In a statement jointly signed by its Chairman, Mr. Ganiyu Dada, and Secretary, Chief Gabe Okoye, it described the attack as "a despicable act of cowardice" and called for the prosecution of the perpetrators.

It also called on government to re-evaluate the current state of security with a view to upgrading the efficiency of its intelligence gathering apparatus.

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