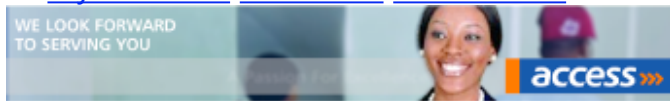


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# How 16 Women, Six Children Died in Easter Vigil Tragedy

10 Apr 2012

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**Governor of Benue, Mr Gabriel Suswan**

**By George Okoh**

They were waiting, symbolically, for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But they got what they did not bargain for – rainstorm, thunder and whirlwind – which brought the

church structure on their heads.

By the time the natural disaster was over, 22 persons – including a two-year-old boy – lay dead. Critically injured were 35 other victims.

For worshipers at St. Robert's Catholic Church, Adamgbe, Vandeakya Local Government Area of Benue State, Saturday night was a night of sorrow and pain.

They were keeping a vigil awaiting the resurrection but a natural disaster that had never before been witnessed in the area happened.

Among the dead were 16 women and six children who had thronged the church to usher in the Easter festivities.

Over 1000 worshippers had gathered at 9pm for the commencement of the open air service within the premises of the church without a premonition of what awaited them.

A witness said the service had commenced but midway into the worship, there was a heavy rain storm and wind which forced the Parish Priest, Rev. Father Cosmos Jooli, to relocate the service indoors into the 49-year-old church building.

But as the service was going on, a strong rainstorm seized the building, pulling down the roof and walls on the worshippers which prompted a stampede and death of many who could have survived the tragedy.

According to the witness, the wailing and cry of the victims attracted the attention of villagers who stormed the church premises to rescue survivors.

He also disclosed that a family lost three members to the disaster.

Recounting their ordeal, three survivors, Philip Ierkwagh, Mathias Tyagber and Joseph Wuhe said the death toll was high among women and children.

They said the women and children, who died, were the first to go into the church when the storm started and had the opportunity to sit near the altar which was the first point that collapsed.

The men had sought shelter at a nearby primary school.

According to Tyagber, "many of the women died because they were occupying the front roll and many of them had their children lying on mats. Many of the male members of the church took refuge in a nearby primary school while the storm raged."

"When the building came crashing down, many of the children and women were instantly crushed.

"The death toll would have been higher but because most of those who were sitting outside moved in quickly to rescue most of the survivors," he said.

In his account, the Parish Priest of the church, Father Jooli, who was still in shock, confirmed that the church collapsed while the service was on-going.

He disclosed that the aged church was built in 1963, stressing that its pillars were weak and not reinforced with iron rods.

"The age of the church building and the structural defects actually contributed to the sudden collapse," he said.

He added that the weight of the church gave way and crushed the dead worshippers.

He said the bodies had been deposited at the Vandeikya General Hospital, while the injured were being treated at the St. Elizabeth Maternity Health Centre, Vandeika, adding that some had been moved to St. Monica Hospital in Adikpo, Kwande Local Government Area.

The chairman of the council Benjamin Dogwo, who expressed shock and disbelief at the disaster, said the prompt response of the council saved many lives.

Dogwo said the council would extend assistance to survivors and families that lost relations to the tragedy.

When THISDAY visited the site, many persons were seen digging through the rubbles of the collapsed building in search of possible survivors.

Reacting to the incident, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, Rt. Rev. Athanasius Usuh, who prayed for the repose of the souls of the dead, said the affected persons died in the service of their creator, the Almighty God.

Among the early callers at the tragedy site were the Deputy Governor of the state, Chief Steven Lawani, the Benue State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Christopher Katso, and other top government functionaries in the state.

After undertaking an on-the-spot assessment of the scene, Lawani commiserated with families that lost their loved ones.

He also assured them that the state government would offset the bills of those in hospitals just as he directed an immediate supply of relief materials to survivors.

Speaking on the incident, the state Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), ASP Alaribe Ejike, who accompanied the state Police Commissioner to the site, said the police did not see any foul play in the tragedy.

He dismissed speculations that the incident was caused by an attack as reported by some foreign media agencies.

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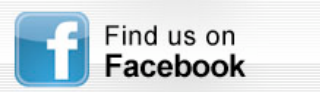
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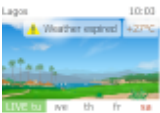
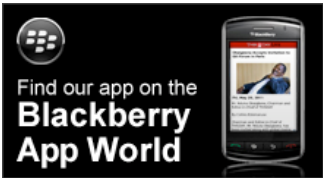
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