

30 Feared Dead in Another Explosion in P'Harcourt

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in Port Harcourt

Another tragedy struck Port Harcourt, Rivers State capital yesterday, as multiple fire incidents and explosion wrecked havoc in four different locations in the city.

A vessel went up in flames at the Abuloma Jetty. The resultant explosion sent shivers down the spine of residents of the area as about 30 persons onboard were feared dead.

The exact number of persons onboard the vessel could not be determined, but it was learnt that crew members, welders who came to carry out maintenance work on the vessel and some ladies suspected to be students from higher institutions in the state were among those who lost their lives in the inferno.

Also, an early morning fire gutted the premises of two media outfits; the Rivers State Newspapers Corporation, publishers of *The Tide* group of newspapers, and the Silverbird's 93.7 Rhythm FM radio station in Port Harcourt.

This came as the Joint Taskforce (JTF), known as the Operation Pulo Shield in the

Niger Delta set five tankers used for illegal bunkering on fire along the Eneka-Igwuruta road in the city.

In the vessel incident, THISDAY gathered that three persons who managed to jump into the river were rescued and were rushed to the hospital by an ambulance belonging to the Rivers State government, although they were still unconscious.

Eyewitnesses said the vessel explosion occurred at about 9.45am yesterday, when the vessel had berthed to enable welders carry out a maintenance work, following a leakage on the ferry.

One of the eyewitnesses, who gave his name as Iyke mo, said the welders were trying to seal an opening on the vessel's fuel tank, when the explosion occurred.

Two other smaller vessels near the vessel that exploded also went up in flames, but people around there used water pumping machines to put out the fire on the two ferries.

Five hours after the incident, men from the Rivers State Fire Service arrived the scene, but it was difficult to put out the fire because their vehicle could not access the vessel.

As at 2pm when THISDAY

left the scene the fire was still raging.

The eyewitness said that the explosion threw one of the welders several feet above the vessel, even as the victim crashed back into the raging fire, adding that the vibration affected buildings in the area.

Another eyewitness, Isaac Sanko said, "The fuel tanker of the ship was not properly washed before the welding work began. There are several people inside it (vessel). Some girls inside too."

Regional Coordinator of NEMA, South-South, Mr. Emerike Umesi, said, "We have not been able to ascertain how many persons involved in the explosion. NEMA and other relevant agencies are still on rescue work after which we will make public how many persons that may have died."

In *The Tide* incident, the fire outbreak, which was said to have started at about 2am, destroyed equipment and property valued millions of Naira.

The fire, which completely destroyed the 2nd floor of the building affected the office of the General Manager of the corporation, audit department,

Credit Control office and the board room located on the left wing of the floor.

General Manager of the corporation, Mr. Celestine Ogolo, said the fire may have been caused by a faulty electrical appliance.

The Joint Task Force (JTF) Sector 2, Operation Pulo Shield, also said it destroyed five tankers allegedly involved in illegal oil bunkering. The tankers were set ablaze at Atali village, near Eneka, along Rumuokwurusi - Igwuruta Road, while the crude they were conveying spilled into the bush around the area.

It was learnt that the vehicles were taken to the area in the early hours of yesterday (Friday) before being set ablaze. When THISDAY visited the scene, residents of the community were seen scooping the product that had gathered into some shallow pits in the bush.

The spokesman of the JTF and Public Relations Officer of 2 Brigade of the Nigerian Army, Bori Camp, Port Harcourt, Capt. Sunday Samuel, confirmed that the force burnt the tankers.

He said the vehicles were used in illegal bunkering of crude oil and that they were destroyed in line with the mandate of the JTF.

