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Synagogue Death Toll Jumps to 86 as Another Church Collapses, Kills 3 in Benin

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•Survivor recounts 28 hours under the rubble ordeal
Chiemelie Ezeobi and Adibe Emenyonu

Two days after the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and other emergency workers wound up rescue operation at the Synagogue Church Of All Nations (SCOAN), the figure of deaths yesterday jumped to 86.

Also, a church building allegedly owned by Christ Chosen Church of God yesterday collapsed in Benin City, capital of Edo State, killing three persons. The church, a story building is located at Usama Street, Uzebu Quarters, Benin City.

Emergency workers rounded off the Synagogue church rescue operations at about 3.34pm after excavation to the ground floor had been completed.

They had officially put the figure of deaths at 80 but yesterday, the Director, NEMA Search and Rescue Operations, Commodore Charles Otegbade, while briefing journalists at the scene, added six more to the already existing figure.

Explaining how he came about the additional six, he said after the rescue operations had been concluded, all stakeholders met and compared figures.

He said it was during that process that it was realised by all that the statistics for six persons were omitted.

Otegbade also said the reason why the high casualty rate was most likely recorded for South Africa was because the wing that collapsed was mapped out for visiting nationals of the country.

On measures to identify the casualties by their nationalities he said investigations were currently ongoing, adding that the forensic examinations would help differentiate them.

Meanwhile, one of the survivors, 28-year-old Ekiti indigene, Temitayo Taiwo, said his faith held him throughout the 28 hours he was underneath the rubble at the ground floor.

The University of West London business graduate while recounting his ordeal said they were rescued at about 5.05pm, 28 hours after the building gave way.

He said, "I was privileged to be part of the visitors' coordinator for the church to help out with the international visitors for the coming week in that building.

"So, we have a particular time that they serve breakfast, lunch and dinner. And every single day, when done with lunch, they head to where the evangelist, wiseman or the prophet himself gives them lectures about the word of God.

"The lunch time was 1pm and I was occupied with so many things and I hadn't even had lunch. I wanted to have a sandwich. The visitors had two choices for lunch- semolina and egusi soup and fried rice.

"After announcing the meal choice, I went to get plastic cups for the water dispenser and when I came back, there was a lady in front of me and she was asking me questions when I heard this sound you only hear in the movies. it didn't really click that something was wrong.

"I saw a line on the walls. It was like a sword went through it. In my mind, I was wondering what happened and before I could process that this was not normal, I put my hand on my head and dozed and that was the last daylight I saw until I was saved.

"Inside the rubble, I was lying on my back and there was not enough leg and head room. Everywhere was so dark and I brought out my phone and used the light to see.

"First, I checked if there were sensations on my fingers and toes and there was. I thanked God because that was the first miracle.

"Where I landed was on top of nails but when I came out, there was no piercings. We tried to use the phone but there was no network.

"Inside the rubble, we were in high spirits because we were taught to pray in the spirit. There was this lady that was leading all of us in prayers and it inspired me.

"Then it started getting difficult to breathe and we begun alternating using the mouth and nose to breathe.

"At a point, we tried to move the chairs and see if we can come out, but a lady beside me pointed out that it was those chairs that were holding the ceiling from crushing me."

On what kept him strong, he said they were taught to pray in the heart and that was what he did throughout even though as human, some doubts kept creeping in.

He said, "When I and others were brought out, we were whisked off to Unital Hospital at Governors Road in Ikotun for treatment. My parents were happy I was rescued alive.";

Eye witness account said the building which served as offices and residential building to officials in the church was hired to workers for demolition.

It was gathered that nine workers were hired at the rate of #3,000 per day were working in the building when three of them went out to eat before the building collapsed killing three while three were rescued alive.

However, the survivors were brought out with broken limbs

Consequently, angry residents in the area have set a bus belonging to the church ablaze and destroyed the main church auditorium.

The angry mob blamed the church for using manual labour to demolish the building when the church officials could have hired an excavator.

One of the lucky survivors who refused to give his name said, "They asked us to destroy the building. We didn't have money to eat and a boy later requested to take us to eat. Six were inside the church when it came down.

"The church asked us to bring down the building. We have fell the upper part. We were removing the blocks but we came and saw the building on them. This is my first day. We did not see the pastor and others again. They were here when the building collapsed".

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