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Synagogue Tragedy: 54 S'African Bodies Ready for Repatriation

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- ***16 nationals of Benin, Togo, Nigeria identified***

By Gboyega Akinsanmi

Two months after the collapse of the guest house belonging to the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) in Ikotun, a Lagos suburb, resulting in the death of about 118 persons, the Lagos State Government on Wednesday approved the repatriation of the bodies of 54 South Africans who died in the incident.

Besides, the state government disclosed that 16 more bodies identified to be nationals of Nigeria, Togo and Benin had also gone through DNA tests, putting the number of victims certified for collection at 70.

The State Governor, Mr. Babatunde Fashola, gave the report at a meeting with the delegates of South African Government at State House, Marina, noting that the bodies of other victims would soon be released.

The meeting, which started at about 5:00 p.m., had in attendance the leader of South African delegation to Nigeria, Mr. Jeff Radebe; a Director in the South African presidency, Mr. Cassius Lubisi and Chief Medical Examiner for the State, Prof. John Obafunwa among others.

The tragic incidence which claimed 118 lives occurred on September 12. Among them are 81 South Africans, three Zimbabweans and one from Democratic Republic of Congo.

At the meeting, Fashola said the state government “has no reason to deny you the right to take those 54 bodies. You have my word already. You can take them whenever you are ready to do so.

“It is left for you to decide whether to take them in batches or wait until we conclude the exercise. But if you are ready, my team will ensure that you take them without any delay.”

The governor explained that the state government had no reason “to delay closure on the investigation, but ensure proper identification of the victims in line with the South Africa culture and traditions.”

But he expressed regret that the incident happened in the state, though acknowledging that he “has managed such post-disaster emergency during the Dana plane crash in 2012. I understand the anxiety of families who want closure and the religious undertone as well.

“Our responsibility is to ensure that families get closure. The culture exists here. I know that this is an issue that has attracted global attention. I understand the call by South Africans to get the bodies of their relatives.

“But we cannot at this time get the process wrong because if we release a body, we want to ensure that each family takes the body of their relative. It will be unpardonable for us to make mistake. The choice of South Africa for the test was a special decision to make the process easier for South Africans who bore the bigger brunt of the tragedy.

“So, since the relatives were in South Africa, it was easier to use a laboratory in the country, where we could easily take samples from the deceased families for the test. It was meant to further demonstrate what our intention was.”

On the investigation, Fashola said Corona’s Inquest “is still ongoing to investigate the disaster and to prosecute anyone culpable.”

But Obafunwa, who is Chief Medical Examiner, said 116 bodies were recovered and had been subjected to post-mortem examination-finger printing, photography, collection of samples and so on.

Of the 116, according to him, they have been able to identify 70 through the DNA laboratory in South Africa. Out of the 70, 54 of them are S/Africans, the rest, from their names, are Nigerians, Benin Republic and Togolese among others.

He said: “We had to collect addition DNA samples to assist the laboratory. We have been working together and talking to the lab. It is expected that more results will come in more than the 70 we have identified.”

Radebe said South-African culture and traditions “demand burial within a week of bereavement. But today makes it two-month since the incident. So, I paid a visit to President Goodluck Jonathan two days ago to convey the message of our president and find ways of speeding up the processes and reparations of the mortal remains of those 81 South Africans.”

Radebe noted that arrangement had been made “to include the four and take them to Pretoria, from where three would be taken to Harare and one to Kinshasa.

“We are ready to repatriate them as soon as we get the green light from the state government. We appreciate your government for the cooperation. Our team has been briefing us on the challenges of identifying the bodies. But the bereavement was very tragic indeed and we have to get the bodies back to South Africa. So it does not get into more difficulties.”

“The planes to convey the bodies are already secured and the team made up of specialists will arrive as soon as we get the go ahead from the state government. They have all been paid for by the South African Government.

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