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Nigeria: 46 Soldiers Perish in Auto Crash

Vanguard (Lagos)
23 May 2008

Posted to the web 23 May 2008

Kingsley Omonobi, Ben Agande and Patience Ogbodo
Lagos

FORTY-SIX Nigerian soldiers including a captain were burnt to death, Wednesday night, in a motor accident on the Kari-Potiskum-Maiduguri road, just 24 hours after returning from a six-month UN Peacekeeping Mission in Darfur, Sudan.

They were on their way back to their base in Monguno, Borno State when two of their Tata trucks collided with a petrol tanker and burst into flame.

President Umaru Yar'Adua expressed shock at the death of the soldiers, and decided to cut short his trip to Tanzania and return home.

The Chief of Defence Staff, General Owoye Azazi, and the Chief of Army Staff, Lt-General Luka Yusuf and the Defence Headquarters expressed similar sentiments.

A total 179 soldiers were making the journey in a convoy of six trucks until the ill-fated trucks had a head-on collision with the tanker and went up in flames. The five other trucks escaped the fire by the whiskers.

Confirming the incident, the Chief of Defence Staff through Captain Senebi Hungi-Apuko said: "On behalf of the Ministry of Defence, Defence Headquarters and the Services, we wish to inform the general public with deep sadness, of the sad event of the death of one officer and 45 Nigerian soldiers who were returning from peace keeping operation in Sudan on Wednesday, 21st May 2008 along Kari-Potiskum-Maiduguri road.

"The tragic incident occurred when two of the trucks conveying the returning soldiers from the Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport, Abuja collided with a tanker laden with petroleum products and exploded in flames. Five soldiers also sustained injuries and are already receiving treatments in the hospital.

"The next of kin of the departed soldiers have been contacted and arrangements are in place for the interment of the deceased with full military honours at the National Cemetery, Abuja tomorrow (today), Friday 23rd, May 2008.

"The government assures the families that their gallant ones died serving the nation and their sacrifices will not be in vain.

"The Chief of Defence Staff, on behalf of the Ministry of Defence and the Nigerian Armed Forces, condoles with the families of the departed soldiers and pray God to give them the strength and fortitude to bear the painful

VANGUARD

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loss of their beloved ones. This is a major disaster not just to the armed forces but to the nation at large."

The Chief of Army Staff left for Bauchi yesterday to ferry the remains of the soldiers to Abuja for burial.

Brig-General Emeka Onwuamaegbu, Director of Army Public Relations, in a statement noted that the remains of the soldiers had been evacuated from the accident scene and deposited at the Bauchi Specialist Hospital mortuary.

"These fine gallants of the 245 battalion were returning to their unit in Monguno after serving six months in the UN operation before they met their death," the statement said, adding: "Meanwhile, an investigation into the cause of the accident has been instituted."

At the Defence and Army Headquarters yesterday, the death of the returnee soldiers was the topic of discussion as officers and personnel who were shocked by the development expressed pity for the families of the soldiers who have waited these past six months to see their breadwinners again.

Immense national loss - Yar'Adua

President Yar'Adua expressed shock at the death of the soldiers and cut short his trip to Tanzania to return to the country today.

His Special Adviser on Communications, Mr Segun Adeniyi, said the president received "with immense sadness news of the tragic death of 46 Nigerian soldiers in a ghastly road accident on their return to the country after meritorious national service in Sudan's Darfur Region.

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"President Yar'Adua deeply regrets that having bravely confronted and survived the hazards of service in strife-ridden Darfur, the gallant soldiers returned home only to lose their lives in a dreadful vehicular collision on their way back to their base," he said.

Mr Adeniyi said "the President believes that the accidental death of these brave soldiers whilst on national service is an immense loss to the country and has directed the Defence Headquarters and the Nigerian Army authorities to convey his personal condolences to the families of the dead soldiers and make appropriate arrangements to give them a befitting burial.

"President Yar'Adua further directed that immediate compassionate action be taken to alleviate the colossal trauma of their shocking deaths on their spouses, children and other dependants," the statement said.

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