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Nigeria: Ocean Surge Tragedy - Death Toll Rises

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BY OLASUNKANMI AKONI, KINGSLEY ADEGBOYE, EVELYN USMAN, EBUN SESSOU AND MONSUR OLOWOOPEJO, 20 AUGUST 2012

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Lagos — The death toll in the Atlantic ocean surge which occurred at the Kuramo Beach, Victoria Island, Lagos, last Saturday has risen as the rescue team yesterday recovered three more dead bodies from the ocean, including a six year old girl, Miss Bisi Kolawole who reportedly got drowned alongside her mother and her siblings.

This bring the total number of the bodies recovered so far to four out of the 16 people declared missing even as 12 persons are still missing.

One of the bodies was reportedly found Saturday night while two were found yesterday at the shore of the beach. So far, only the body of the local diver earlier found on Saturday has been identified. The local diver identified simply as Olurunwa lost his life in his attempt to save the drowning victims.

Survivor, residents recount experience

Some relatives who claimed not to have seen their loved ones since the incident happened, thronged the area to ascertain whether the recovered were their relatives but left disappointed.

One of them who gave his name as Mr Salami said his brother -in-law identified as Saidi Afoju, only came to Lagos two months ago .

He said: "He told me he was going to Kuramo beach with a friend on Saturday. He left about 8am. When he got to the beach , he called to say he had reached there. And that was the end I heard of him. I have been trying his line but it is not going. He did not get back home until I left home for work that night.

When I came back yesterday morning, my wife told me he had not come back. Initially, I was angry because he never told me he would not be coming back. I was still fuming when news of the ocean surge filtered in. I came here to find out if he was among those swept away. But the bodies I saw did not look like his."

Police spokesman

Spokesman for the Lagos State Police Public Relations Officer, Ngozi Braide said search would continue, assuring that by today more bodies would be recovered.

"As you know, it takes three days for drowned bodies to be afloat. Hopefully, by tomorrow, we hope to recover more bodies. Policemen will be there until work ends there".

Another resident in one of the shanties who gave her name as Dupe also recounted his experience. He told newsmen that the surge, "happened very early in the morning when so many people were yet to wake up. We are still looking for some people now as we speak. We just pray that they have not been washed away by the surge".

Consequently, the state government ordered the immediate evacuation of the state's Waterfront residents to prevent further possible disaster from the seven days of high waves accompanied by a strong ocean surge.

One of the occupants, Akin Bayode said, the incident was sad and capable of ruining lives of Lagosians especially those who have been carrying out their businesses in the Kuramo beach.

His words: "Despite the fact that the country is rich, yet the people are suffering. The government is used to pushing people around without an adequate alternative provision."

Secretary of the Association, Mr. Micheal Onuwaje, however, faulted the number released by the government,

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saying "the number of those who were drowned can only be ascertained in the next few days when the ocean would have dumped the bodies on the shoreline."

On the number of the structures that were affected by the surge, Onuwaje noted that the surge affected over 28 carbins along the shoreline.

Speaking on the directive of the state government, Chairman of the Kuramo Tourism Investors Association, Chief Zubair Alashe said they were in support of the government action, adding "it is the government of the people."

According to Alashe, "the fact is that the government has given us a directive that we should evacuate the beach and we are ready to do that."

The vicious current first attacked Kuramo Beach near Goshen Estate and later spread to Alpha Beach, Mayegun and Badagry waterfronts sweeping away scores of people in the process.

Vanguard gathered that the ocean surge swooped on inhabitants of the shanties in the early hours of the day when they were still indoors, causing confusion along the coastlines.

The state government has also commenced immediate demolition and evacuation exercise of occupants in the nearby cabins and structures at Kuramo Beach to prevent any further possible loss of lives as well as allow for free movement for the reclamation process. Over 100 of such structures were pulled down as hundreds of people have been rendered homeless and property running into millions already lost in the process.

When Vanguard team visited the scene of the incident, it was observed that the entire place had been levelled to the ground.

Decision to demolish structures

Commissioner for Waterfront and Infrastructure, Mr. Adesegun Oniru, who led the state government demolition team at 12 noon, yesterday, said that the decision to demolish the entire structures at the beach was decided by the government to save lives and property in the state.

According to Oniru, "What is happening here is nothing to panic about. There is global warming over the world and Nigeria is not exempted.

"As the situation is now, the people who were residing here before cannot do that anymore. Kuramo beach is now a thing of the past. And until we put it back to its natural form no one should come closer to this area. It is not free for anyone to trade or live here again."

"Anyone who was here yesterday will know that the ocean surge required quick intervention of the state and Federal Government. But as a state government, we have brought in a palliative measure to cushion the effect. We have earlier given warnings to occupants on the possible ocean surge due to climate change effect."

"And one of the palliative measures adopted by the state government was that, we brought in heaps of sands from the ongoing construction site of the Eko Atlantic City, on Saturday, to sandfill some parts of the Beach that were submerged. And with this, we were able to vacate the owners of the structures.

"And this morning, (yesterday) in order to reduce the loss, we allowed the occupants of the structures to move into the place before we completely demolish the shanties to remove their property.

"After the demolition, major work will commence immediately before anyone can return to this place for recreation purpose in the nearest future." He added that no one will be allowed to come closer to this place.

Oniru had earlier explained that the state is experiencing the extreme of this weather condition due to the location of Lagos State, noting that other coastal waterfront areas badly affected from which people would be expected to move include Badagry and Ojo Waterfront areas, Bar Beach, Goshen Estate, Maiyegun and Alpha Beach.

He added that the State emergency services have already been mobilized to continue to monitor the situation and respond accordingly.

Oniru then urged residents to remain calm as the government was doing everything possible to protect lives and property from the surge

Also speaking, the General Manager of the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency, LASEMA, Dr. Oke Osanyintolu said that the aim was to put a stop to the encroachment of the coastline in the state by the residents.

He said the place will be cordoned-off totally, adding "We have advised those who were displaced from this place to move inward and search for better places within the state to carry out their businesses."

Environmentalists' point of view

Reacting to the surge, an environmentalist, Mr Chike Chikwendu, an engineer, noted that the surge was an annual phenomenon that had nothing to do with rainfall. He, however, attributed the surge to the distortion of the Kuramo Lagoon

Chikwendu who is the General Secretary of the Friends of the Environment, FOTE, stated that nature provided the Kuramo Lagoon to act as a reservoir for such overflow of water from the ocean, but regretted that human interference with the lagoon and the massive developments around the beach, must have played a key role in the ocean surge.

According to him, water from the ocean would have been "warehoused" by the lagoon during tidal waves but noted that the distortion of the Kuramo lagoon, has made it impossible for water to percolate there.

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He said: "The surge is part of human interference with nature. I can not also exonerate the ongoing development at the Eko- Atlantic City. But by and large, this is a natural phenomenon that happens every year."

Causes of storm surge

According to a recent publication, a storm surge is an offshore rise of water associated with a low pressure weather system, typically tropical cyclones and strong extratropical cyclones. Storm surges are caused primarily by high winds pushing on the ocean's surface. The wind causes the water to pile up higher than the ordinary sea level. Low pressure at the centre of a weather system also has a small secondary effect, as can the bathymetry of the body of water. It is this combined effect of low pressure and persistent wind over a shallow water body which is the most common cause of storm surge flooding problems. The term "storm surge" in casual (non-scientific) use is storm tide; that is, it refers to the rise of water associated with the storm, plus tide, wave run-up, and freshwater flooding. When referencing storm surge height, it is important to clarify the usage, as well as the reference point. National Hurricane Centre refers to storm surge as water height above predicted astronomical tide level, and storm tide as water height above NGVD-29. Most casualties during a tropical cyclone occur during the storm surge.

In areas where there is a significant difference between low tide and high tide, storm surges are particularly damaging when they occur at the time of a high tide. In these cases, this increases the difficulty of predicting the magnitude of a storm surge since it requires weather forecasts to be accurate to within a few hours. Storm surges can be produced by extra-tropical cyclones,

Factors that determine the surge heights for landfalling tropical cyclones include the speed, intensity, size of the radius of maximum winds (RMW), radius of the wind fields, angle of the track relative to the coastline, the physical characteristics of the coastline and the bathymetry of the water offshore

Expert proffers solution

Another expert, Mr. Afolabi Adedeji, a civil engineer stressed the importance of Environmental Impact Assessment EIA reports on coastline projects embarked upon by the government such as land reclamation at Osborne Foreshore and the proposed Eko Atlantic City.

Adedeji, said such reports must include public hearing where all stakeholders must be allowed to air their views.

According to him, the flow of storm water after heavy rainfall, which runs from drainage system into lagoons and finally into the ocean is altered to some extent by sand filling and land reclamation projects, pointing out that a good EIA study will reveal the likely extent of this man-made distortions whether the effect can be adequately mitigated, and if it is advisable to continue with the proposed project.

Adedeji, who called for the immediate establishment of Coastal Engineering Units in the Department of Civil Engineering in Nigerian Universities, said the Institute of Oceanography at the Bar Beach, Victoria Island should be strengthened to be able to meet the modern day challenges of coastal communities.

Causes of ocean surge in V/I: Lagos explains

Lagos State Government however attributed the surge to the global warming. The government explained that the global warming is due to increasing tidal storms, melting ice caps and glacier retreats, expansion of sea water, increasing rate of precipitation as well as human activities such as deforestation, wetland drainage and illegal sandminers.

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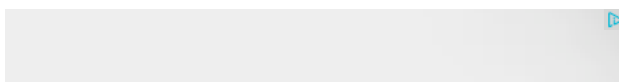
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