

# SYNAGOGUE: 67 S/Africans died, says Zuma

## ...Woman 'resurrects', walks out of debris

By Adekunle Aliyu & Evelyn Usman with Agency Report

**S**OUTH Africa's President announced Tuesday that 67 of his compatriots were among scores of worshippers killed in the collapse of a popular and controversial Nigerian megachurch.

Declaring his nation in grief, Jacob Zuma said he was "greatly saddened to announce that 67 South Africans died and scores of others sustained injuries," when a church hostel building collapsed in Lagos on Friday.

The tally of South African dead exceeds the previous toll of 62 thought dead in the disaster, a grim signal that the number of fatalities is likely to rise.

Rescuers say the church's hostel — which housed Nigerian and foreign followers of a preacher and televangelist, T.B. Joshua — had been overburdened by the construction of additional floors.

The goateed preacher initially claimed that only a few people were injured and then suggested that a low-flying aircraft was responsible for the collapse.

On Tuesday he tweeted: "Hard times may test me, they cannot destroy me."

Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency's Ibrahim Farinloye said that much about the incident remained unclear.

The church known as The Synagogue "hid so much information from us, and (this is) the cause of frustration for rescuers," he said.

Dubbed "The Prophet", Joshua claims to have foreseen the Malaysian Airlines MH17 plane crash, the Boston marathon bombings and the results of Nigerian football matches.

He counts presidents and prime ministers among his flock, giving him considerable political clout.

Former Malawian head of state Joyce Banda, who has described Joshua as her "spiritual father," said Tuesday she was "deeply shocked" by the accident.

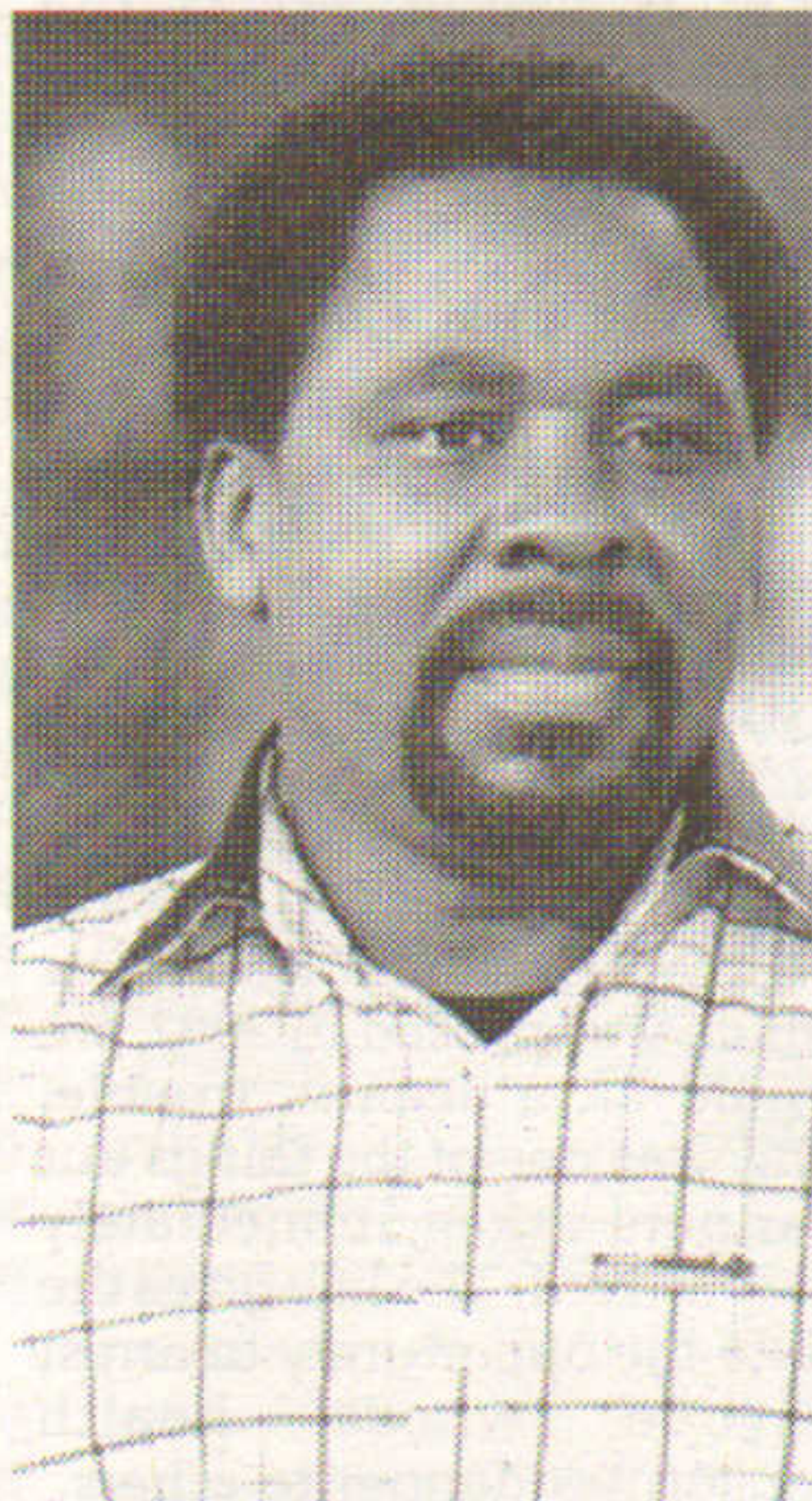
"It's unfortunate that people lost their lives while praying," she told AFP.

According to Joshua's website, three of the church's previous buildings were also destroyed.

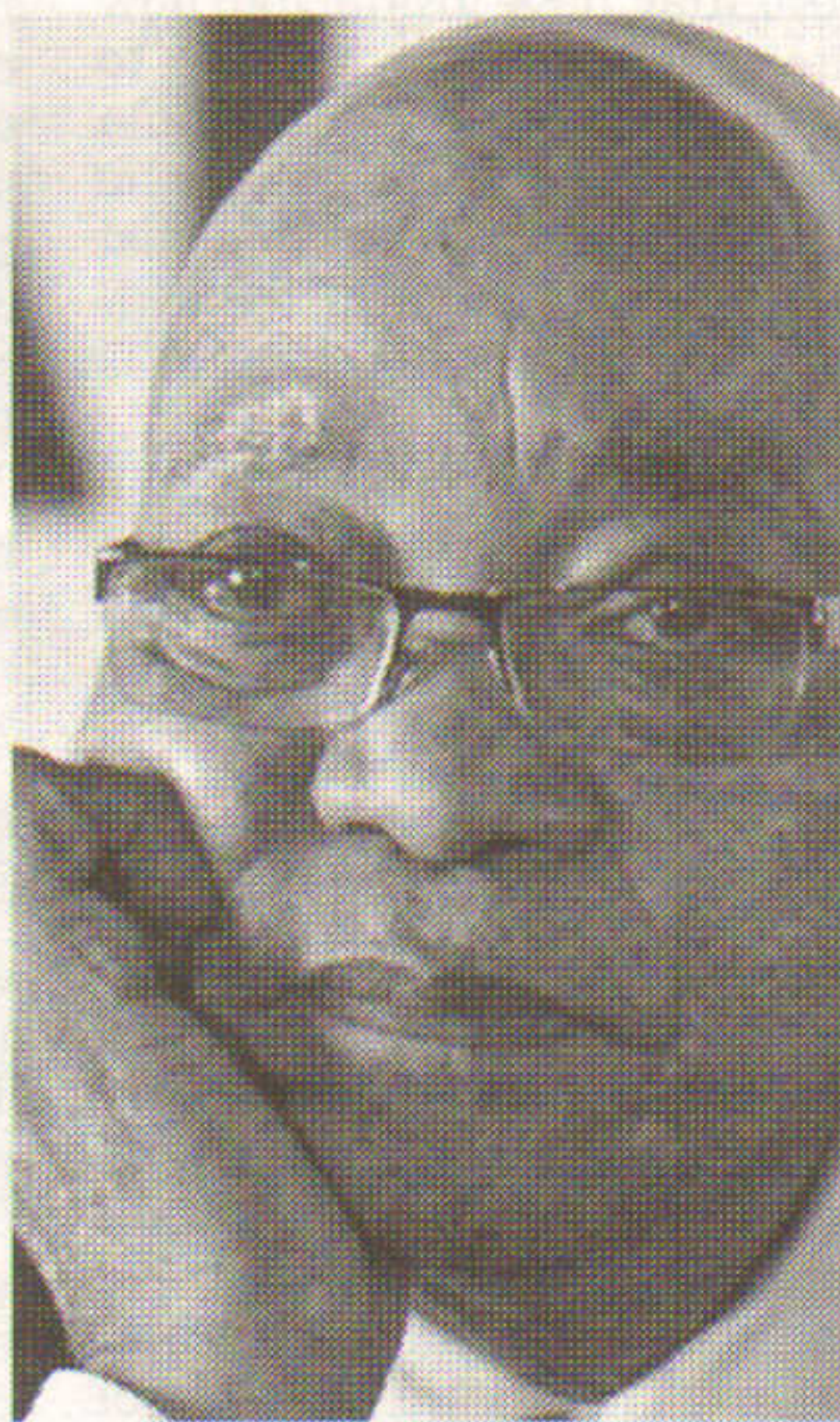
"The roof of the first church was blown off by a storm, the second church was washed away by a flood while the third church also collapsed due to severe weather conditions."

**- A nation grieving -**

Late Tuesday rescue workers



Prophet T.B. Joshua



South African President, Zuma

were still sifting through the rubble of the church's hostel, hoping against hope to find survivors.

Their prayers were answered earlier in the day when a woman was rescued and was able to walk away with just a broken wrist.

The discovery prompted emergency workers to slow down their digging in the wreckage of the guesthouse.

But for many others, there will be no dramatic and happy exit.

Rescue efforts that have so far saved the lives of 133 victims are scheduled to end on Wednesday.

"We have reached a critical stage now and more survivors are likely to be brought out of the rubble," Farinloye said.

At least five South African church tour groups were at The Synagogue at the time of the collapse, according to South African officials.

"Not in the recent history of our country have we had this large number of our people die in one incident outside the country," Zuma said in a statement to the nation.

"The whole nation shares the pain of the mothers, fathers, daughters and sons who have lost their loved ones. We are all in grief."

Zuma said he had ordered government departments to help family members get to Nigeria to identify the bodies of their loved ones and repatriate the remains as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the National Emergency Management Agency, NEMA, disclosed that the death toll hit 63 yesterday with the recovery of additional 14 corpses, even as relations of victims were barred from entering the Isolo General Hospital wards to ascertain whether their loved ones were on admission. The relations were asked by health workers to

obtain clearance from SCOAN before they could be allowed in.

The National Emergency Management Agency, NEMA, said yesterday that the 63rd body was recovered at 8.15pm adding that sniffer dogs aided yesterday's recoveries.

However, in a clear case of providence at play, a woman reportedly walked out of the debris of the collapsed building all by herself at about 2 am yesterday, with only a broken wrist. This brings the total number of survivors to 131. Besides, the Standards Organisation of Nigeria, SON, yesterday said it had commenced investigation into the quality of the materials used for the collapsed building. The organisation said it had been able to identify manufacturers of the building materials used for the construction, adding that the next step would be to ascertain whether they were of approved specification or not.

The dark complexioned woman, with an undisclosed identity, that walked out of the debris, was said to have been heard shouting in a faint voice; "Thank you Jesus" before she was carried by some rescuers on standby into a waiting ambulance.

When *Vanguard* arrived the scene yesterday, members of SCOAN were seen discussing the woman's miraculous escape from the claws of death.

The South West spokesman for the National Emergency Management Agency, Ibrahim Farinloye, said the woman was the only living person among those recovered yesterday.

He said: "A woman of about 45 years old walked out of the rubble on her own around 2am today (yesterday). This brings the total of persons rescued alive from the debris to 131, while we have 62 persons dead"

A breakdown of the figure so far, showed that three dead

bodies were recovered on the first day (Friday), of the collapse, with 15 persons rescued alive. Next day, Saturday, the number of those rescued rose to 124, while the dead was put at 17.

On Sunday, September 15, six persons were rescued alive, thereby increasing the number of those rescued to 130 while the death toll rose to 45.

As at the time of this report, excavation work was said to have reached the first floor, believed to have been occupied by visitors.

When *Vanguard* visited Isolo General Hospital, three women who claimed to have travelled all the way from Ghana, Rivers and Imo states, respectively, said they were there to ascertain whether their relatives were among those hospitalised.

According to one of the women who gave her name as Mrs Kwabena: "My niece, Mrs Frimpong Komla, told us she was travelling to Nigeria to attend a healing programme at SCOAN which we usually watch on television.

"Since she left, nothing has been heard from her. When news of the collapse filtered in Sunday, I decided to come and check for myself because my niece is a widow and also childless.

"I came into Lagos yesterday (Monday) but could not locate the church until this morning. I joined some people who said they were coming to this hospital to check if their missing loved ones are here. But to my surprise, we were asked to go and get a letter from the church before we would be allowed to go inside the ward."

### SON begins investigation

Meanwhile, SON yesterday said it had begun investigation into the immediate cause of the collapsed five-storey building.

Part of the investigation, according to the organisation's Head, Inspectorate and Compliance, Engr. Bede Obaye, was to ascertain whether the building materials used for the construction were within the standard specification.

Obaye, who made this disclosure during a visit to the scene yesterday, revealed that the organisation had been able to identify manufacturers of the materials used.

According to him: "We have come here to see exactly what happened. We have watched the clip of what happened. But beyond that, we are here to investigate the remote causes of the collapse, to look at the materials and to ask questions about the engineers and contractors that handled the project.