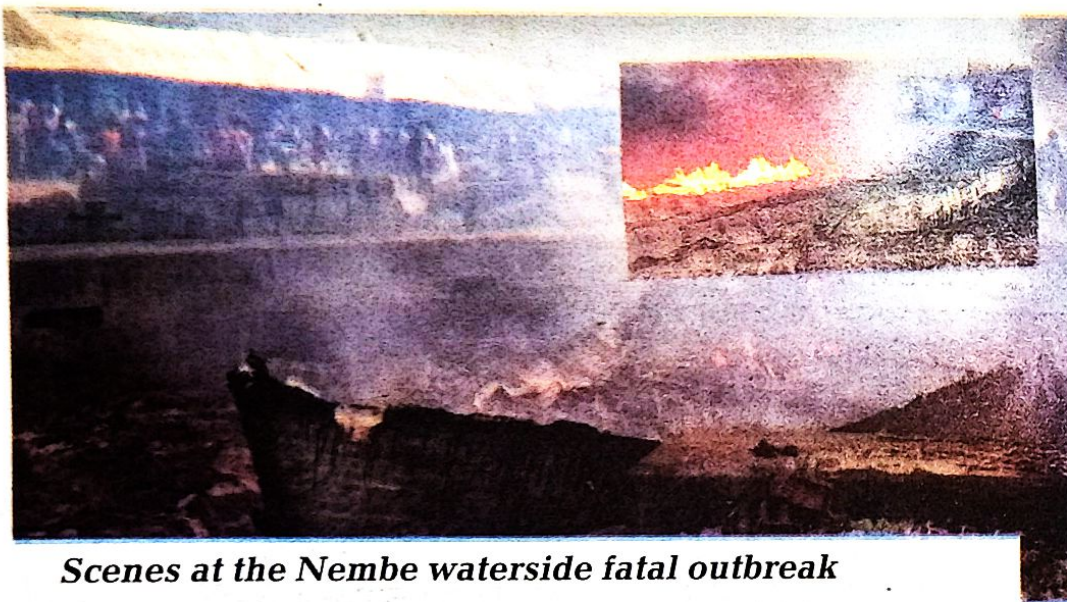


KPOFIRE: Woman leaves her three children in a boat, returns to meet them all burnt

• *Another mother, her one month old baby burnt too in Port Harcourt serial fire outbreaks*



Scenes at the Nembe waterside fatal outbreak

By Egufe Yafugborhi

For three consecutive days, destructive fire outbreaks, fueled by unsafe, indiscriminate storing and movement of illegally refined petroleum products, better known as "kpofire" wrecked havoc in parts of Port Harcourt, Rivers state capital city.

The infernos caused death, injuries and disruptions of livelihoods. Beyond that, the serial fire outbreaks also exposed failures of key stakeholders in checking the resilience of oil thieves and illicit producers of 'kpofire'.

The serial fires started the night of Saturday 20 November at No 1 Isiokpo Street, D-Line, Port Harcourt City Local Government Area (LGA), where illegally

refined fuel stored in a presumed abandoned warehouse went up in flames, stretching as far as 50 meters to surrounding property.

Uche Okoro, resident in the neighborhood said, "Once set off, the fire spread through the spilled fuel along the gutters, burning cars parked on the street. In the collateral damage, it burnt surrounding buildings and warehouses, including a church and razed part of the Port Harcourt center of the National Institute of Information Technology, NIIT.

"Big tankers, power generating sets, 40ft container and goods inside the warehouses were also burnt down, with the huge loss estimated at tens of millions of naira."

Victims were still lamenting the huge losses when residents in Rumuokoro, Obio/

Akpor LGA raised alarm Sunday afternoon on another destructive fire, this time in an even bigger illicit petroleum products distribution site.

A witness narrated, "from about noon, it razed the uncompleted building where it started and narrowly missed an adjacent big branch of a commercial bank along the East-West Road. Other property behind were also affected before intervention from fire service."

Inside the uncompleted building where it started were concealed over 20 tanks of illegally refined products. The front of the building was a warehouse for bags of rice, spaghetti and cartons of tin tomatoes among other foodstuff. All were burnt. A large underground tank filled with illegally refined products was not torched.

Fatal dimension

The third incident, the Port Harcourt serial outbreaks assumed fatal dimension at the Bonny/Bille jetties of the Nembe Waterside, Port Harcourt City LGA.

From the inferno that lasted several hours, Nnamdi Omoni, Police Public Relations Officer, Rivers Command, confirmed recovery of four bodies. A careless smoker reportedly ignited a wooden passenger/cargo boat offloading volumes of illegally refined fuel. Among the dead recovered were three children. They were siblings.

Eyewitnesses suspect the death toll is far more. A witness simply identified as Johnson narrated, "Children, and many others are fear dead. The boat was parked beside 6 others, one of them loaded passengers, another with timber, crayfish, garni, kerosene and other food items waiting to take off.

"You know where they used to bring fuel and diesel, even the jetty water was covered with so much of the mix of highly inflammable

products spilled on the water that any contact could spread wildfire. The spark from the cigarette caught the fire. All the seven boats and their contents were razed.

Another witness who saw it all happen, in his own account, said, "my greatest pain were the children killed. A mother left her three children in the boat to go buy items onshore. They were burnt before she could return to save them. One of two victims said to have been rushed to hospital was said to have died, news just filtered now."

Madam Elijah, another observer said, "A baby of a month old and the mother, roasted because of carelessness. People were offloading product from a boat and a man was smoking. I don't know what he did, next thing we saw was fire burst from the offloading boat. Since the place is already saturated with oil and various fuel products, the fire became uncontrollable.

"Heavy wind helped spread the fire to umbrellas and tables of traders buying and selling. Fire service personnel who came in were driven away by traders for perceived late response when much damage had been done."

Leader of Crayfish and fish sellers at the Nembe Bille water front, Henrietta Simeon lamented that their goods worth millions of naira were destroyed by the fire.

Govt reacts

Rivers Commissioner for Energy and Natural Resources, Peter Meede had, on assessment of the colossal damages announced that investigations have begun to find lasting solutions.

On the immediate action, he said, "The Rivers government has dedicated two telephone lines for people to report unwholesome practices in the state. We have warned severally that when you see and you don't report, when it happens, it is your own property that would be destroyed, it is your own life that could be lost.

With the impunity with which indulgence in oil theft and 'kpofire' thrive in Rivers, only a very few persons have confidence in the responses from government and the police.