

Subject: LAGOS EXPLOSION KILLS OVER 300

Location: Ilado, Lagos

Date: 13th May, 2006

- Over 300 persons perish in Lagos Pipeline blast
- Community leaders accuse NNPC, security officials of negligence, complicity
- Residents desert home
- Decomposing bodies cause fear of epidemic

{mosimage} A petrol pipeline caught fire at 3.00am on Friday 12 May 2006 at Ilado near Lagos killing over 300 people in the inferno. The victims were allegedly scooping fuel from a burst pipeline when the incident occurred. The pipeline is owned by the Pipelines and Products Marketing Company (PPMC), a subsidiary of the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). The tragedy is reminiscent of the 1998 incident in Jesse, Delta State where over a thousand lives were lost. Early callers at the explosion site said about 200 bodies were picked up for mass burial by the Lagos State government on Friday. However, during a visit by ERA team on Saturday, 17 dead bodies were counted floating on the salty water of the island while 13 mangled and charred bodies littered the shoreline. The intensity of the inferno was also said to have reduced some bodies to ashes.

Pipeline explosions of monumental human tragedy have been of worrying frequency in Nigeria. In 1998, Jesse, a community in E thiope West local government area of Delta state lost over 1000 souls to an explosion from a PPMC pipeline. In December 2000, E bute Oko, a fishing community near Lagos lost 50 people to another spill fire. Many of the dead were reported to be fishermen caught in the rampaging fire while on their daily fishing business. Same year, Egborode village in Okpe local government area of Delta had a spill that covered over 30 kilometers radius. Over a hundred people were lost to the spill fire that later occurred.

Ilado the latest spill site had experienced one in 2004 during which over 30 people were killed. Last May, about 30 market women were roasted to death in Ibadan, Oyo State when the vehicle

they were traveling in was caught in a pipeline explosion. Same last year, over 60 people were killed in an explosion from a PPMC pipeline at Ekan community in Uvwie council area of Delta State. Several spills were reported last year in different states across the Niger Delta each with its own human toll and destruction of the environment. In January this year, 20 youths were burnt to death in an explosion caused by a spill from Shell's pipeline at Brass Creek. Just a few weeks ago, a PPMC pipeline that passes through Oke Odo, a densely populated Lagos suburb ruptured and started spilling fuel into the community. Thousands of youths converged at the spill site to scoop free fuel. The PPMC was contacted but they did nothing to stop the spill. It took civil action by community people to get PPMC to clamp the leaking pipeline. The Ilado incident appears to have challenged the authorities who are supposed to provide regular surveillance to the long stretch of pipelines in the area.

ERA team gathered from local folks that the spill that caused the inferno occurred a few months back. They spoke of possible connivance between the Police, PPMC officials and the people that were scooping fuel. This suspicion was further strengthened by the discovery of a half-burnt police uniform at the spill site. The Inspector General of Police, Mr Sunday E. Ihendero who later visited the scene while ERA's team was still at the explosion site was visibly shocked by the magnitude of the explosion, describing it as a national disaster. When confronted with the story of the police uniform, the Inspector General promised that investigations will be instituted to unravel the cause of the fire and those involved.

The Bale (community head) of Tomaro village, one of the communities near the explosion site, Chief Moshood Onisiwo said the PPMC has a police team patrolling the area and he could not understand why no arrest was made after they detected the spill and why nothing was done to contain it.

During the visit by ERA team bodies were seen floating on the waters of Ilado. Many of the victims were later on buried in mass graves. Residents of communities near the spill site believe many of the bodies were not recovered. They were worried about the extent of the pollution of the water systems that they depend on for various needs.

Tunde Akano, Disaster Coordinator with the Red Cross, Lagos State, said the process of clearing the bodies could run into days saying that the Ilado incident is more severe than previous ones. According to him, 176 bodies were retrieved from the water by the Amuwo Odofin Council officers on Friday but additional 35 were recovered on Saturday with prospect of recovering more.

When the IG and his men visited Okwarta and other villages on the islands, residents appeared to have disappeared for fear of possible arrest. The traditional ruler (Bale) of one of the villages, Jimson Ali, who responded to the IG's speech said about 20 of his subjects were killed in the incident.

Speaking on what caused the spill, one of the residents who did not want to be named said: We just dey sleep and quickly we hear something more than thunder. We look out see fire and big smoke everywhere. Several hundreds of 50 litre jerry cans allegedly used by the fuel scavengers were kept a short distance away from the explosion site in the bush. Many had names inscribed on them. Names like Grace, Alabo and Baby were boldly written in white colours confirming that the spill had been on over a long time and that there may have been a business relationship between the police team, NNPC officials and the fuel thieves.

Throughout the visit of the ERA team including the time the IG visited the spill site, no PPMC official was on site to offer any explanation.

1. Counseling for affected families and individuals as well as prompt medical attention for the wounded.
2. Periodic integrity checks on all pipelines whether they are conveying crude or refined products.
3. Effective surveillance of the pipelines and sufficient protective barriers to keep off unauthorized access.
4. Prompt response mechanisms.
5. Community participation in decisions bothering on security and safety of pipelines.
6. Immediate clean up and restoration of the affected environment and community.