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Out-going Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), Mr. Kofi Annan, yesterday pledged the world body's assistance to Nigeria to check further vandalisation of pipelines in the country and in other West African nations. Annan's pledge came as prominent Nigerians continued to express shock on the number of casualties that followed the incident.

The Federal Government has also directed all its medical outfits, including Lagos University Hospital and Federal Medical Centre, Yaba to join in the treatment of the victims, even as 288 dead bodies recovered from the scene were given mass burial yesterday.

The UN scribe, who expressed sadness over the tragic incident, called for a review of Nigeria's fuel supply management, and of risks that could lead to other environmental or technological disasters in West Africa.

Annan, in a statement yesterday, commiserated with families of those who lost their lives, regretting that the theft of fuel from Nigerian pipelines has become a frequent occurrence, "often with tragic consequences."

He stated that "The United Nations stands ready to assist in this endeavour, and to help in assessing current gaps in risk mapping and disaster response in the region," pledged Annan, who steps down this week as the UN boss at the end of his second five-year term.

Speaking during a visit to the scene, Minister of State for Petroleum, Dr. Edmund Daukoru, expressed deep sorrow over the loss of lives of innocent persons in the fire which he blamed on the greedy nature of a few people.

He assured that the Federal Government would work hand-in-hand with the Lagos State government to find lasting solution to what he called the worisome problem.

He restated the need for the residents of the area to assist the security forces in guarding the pipelines, even as he commended the community for their positive role during the tragic incident.

The minister said stated that he was not at the scene to apportion blames, but to show solidarity and to sympathise with the victims' families.

Noting that it was not possible to patrol the pipeline areas 100 per cent, the Minister argued that where there were miscreants and criminals who are bent on circumventing the security arrangements, it would be impossible to achieve 100 per cent result.

Also reacting to the incident, Chief Executive Officer, ENI Corporation, (Agip), Mr. Paolo Scaroni, who visited the victims at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, where some of the victims with various degrees of burns were admitted, assured that his company has already mobilised a team of medical experts from Italy to join their counterparts in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, to provide specialist medical services to the fire victims, in terms provision of medical equipment and drugs as well as financial

assistance.

Scaroni, who said he was in Nigeria to discuss with President Olusegun Obasanjo on how to secure the safe release of the three staff of Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC), its Nigerian subsidiary, who were taken hostage about a fortnight ago by Niger

Delta militants, said he was touched by the tragic incident and decided to visit the hospital to see the victims and to commiserate with the Nigerian government over the disaster.

The Chief Medical Director, Dr. Femi Olugbile, who received the Eni Chief, disclosed that three of the victims who were brought to the hospital have died.

Olugbile, who briefed newsmen on the development, stated that the injuries sustained by the victims were quite extensive, as according to him most of the victims had more than 50 degrees burns, which experts considered highly risky for survival.

On his part, the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos State, Cardinal Olubunmi Okojie, urged the Federal and state governments to take stiffer actions to deter people from scooping fuel.

While blaming the incident on poverty and greed, Okogie advised the Nigeria Police and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) to ensure effective monitor of the network of fuel pipelines across the length and breadth of the country so as to minimize such occurrences.

The Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria (ERA/FOEN), a Non Governmental Organization, in its reaction called for the resignation of the Group Managing Director of the NNPC, Egnr. Funso Kupolukun, citing what it described as his inability to contain incessant explosions from the corporation's pipelines.

Also reacting to the incident in a statement, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) governorship candidate in Anambra State, Dr. Andy Uba, said he was deeply touched by the Tuesday tragedy which resulted in the avoidable death of hundreds of persons.

He also enjoined security agencies to be more alive to their responsibilities, particularly in apprehending persons who seek to sabotage Nigeria economically and otherwise.

Meanwhile, the Federal Government yesterday directed all its medical outfits, including Lagos University Hospital and Federal Medical Centre Yaba, to join in the treatment of the victims, even as 288 dead bodies recovered from the scene were given mass burial yesterday.

Among callers at the scene yesterday were the Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Health, Alhaji Ibrahim Talba and the Inspector General of Police, Mr. Sunday Ehindero