

Ammunition dump explodes in Lagos

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Hundreds of people were killed in Nigeria late on Sunday January 27, after an ammunition dump in the centre of Lagos exploded. Lagos is Nigeria's largest city, with a population of 12 million, and the main commercial centre.

The explosion forced thousands of people to flee for their lives. No official death toll has been released. Lagos' daily newspaper, the *Vanguard*, has estimated that more than 2,000 people were killed in the explosion, whilst state television cited unnamed witnesses claiming that between 750 to 1,000 bodies had been recovered in various parts of the city.

Some 4,000 were initially reported missing and local mortuaries were full and hospitals overwhelmed by those injured in the blast. Most recent reports indicate that more than 1,100 people are still missing, mostly children aged under 11.

The ammunition was stored at Ikeja military base, situated in a busy residential area and next to one of the city's main transport interchanges. After it caught fire, shrapnel and heavy artillery, including bombs, rained down on the streets and tin roofs of the surrounding neighbourhood. Many buildings, including the market and a nearby church, were destroyed and a hospital and local school was damaged.

Scores of explosions sent fireballs over the city. Windows were shattered up to six miles away. Panic broke out amongst the inhabitants and tens of thousands ran to find safety. Many of the dead are women and children, who drowned in the nearby Oke Afa and Pako canals, as they attempted to get away from the inferno. Due to the canals being partly blanketed with water hyacinths and an electricity blackout at the time, it would have been easy for the panicking crowds to mistake them for a safe haven, or to underestimate their depth. Others may have been pushed into the canals by the pressure of the crowd.

On Monday morning fishermen began the task of

removing corpses from the water. Soon a pile of bodies had built up alongside the sides of the canals, with people desperately looking for missing relatives.

No clear report has emerged of what caused the ammunition to explode. Army spokesman Colonel Felix Chukwumah said the explosions began when a fire spread to the depot. Reports have suggested the fire started at a market near the depot, but Chukwumah said it was too far away. Other reports cite a fire at a gas station as the cause of the disaster.

The conditions at the ammunition dump considerably worsened the scale of the disaster. The munitions, many of them highly explosive and described as "ageing", were kept under tarpaulins, without any protection from accidents or the spread of fire. No water or emergency equipment was available at the dump, or at the military base alongside it, to douse the flames.

Anger has swept through the Nigerian population, directed at both the army and the political authorities, for allowing such weaponry to be stockpiled in the middle of a highly populated city. Given the growing political instability in Nigeria, many people initially thought that a military coup was taking place. This was not an unreasonable assumption given that the many military coups in Nigeria's history have been organised from the Ikeja base where elite troops are based.

Lagos State Governor, Senator Bola Tinubu, appeared on television accompanied by Brigadier-General George Emdin, commanding officer of the Ikeja garrison, attempting to restore calm. "It is a question of accident, not a military invasion," said Tinubu. "The general in command is here with me. Everyone should be calm. You should stay at home. All speculation about military changes of power is not correct."

Anger at the army was also provoked by their response once the bombardment of the area had started.

While military personnel and a few houses and businesses in the immediate vicinity of the ammunition dump were evacuated, a sprawling shantytown hit by the explosion was all but ignored. Most of those killed are thought to have originated from this area.

There is evidence that both military and political authorities were well aware of the danger posed by the dump. According to *AFP*, a member of the Army Wives Association had warned about the arms dump when a small explosion took place a year ago. “The army wives had been complaining that it was dangerous, but they did not do anything. They did not care,” she said.

As official inquiries have been set up to investigate the causes of the disaster, both the army and political leaders have attempted to avoid responsibility. Emdin suggested that the lack of finance from the government was the problem: “It is our old armoury where we keep heavy calibre bombs. It has been begging for repairs for quite sometime, the higher authority is aware.” Tinubu suggested the problem was the expansion of the population, with people moving to live in an area that was once a military encampment far from the city centre.



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