

Nigerian factory fire kills 45 workers

Our correspondent
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At least 45 workers lost their lives on the night of September 15 when a fire swept through a Nigerian plastics factory—West Africa Rubber Products Limited—in the Odoguny Industrial Estate, Ikorodu, 40 kilometres north of Lagos. The fire gutted the factory and the adjacent Super Engineering Limited, both of which are owned by a conglomerate based in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

There has been much speculation about the number of workers killed in the fire. The Nigerian Red Cross reported that seven bodies were found by the police on the night of the fire and 37 more were retrieved the next morning.

According to Reuters, Nigerian newspapers put the death toll at hundreds, saying that scores of night shift workers are still missing.

The police have been unable to confirm the higher toll, but both they and the Red Cross said they expected to find more bodies as the wreckage was cleared. Eleven workers are receiving treatment at Noah Hospital in Ikorodu. The *Vanguard* (Lagos) reported that seven of them have severe burns and the other four have gunshot wounds.

According to the BBC, the police are investigating reports that the factory gates had been locked and the owners had opened fire on crowds who rushed the complex during the blaze. The BBC report says that police intervened after local residents invaded the plant and attempted to lynch the owners, accusing them of locking the staff in the factory and thus causing their deaths.

General Manager M. Lai denied that there was any policy of locking doors. He admitted that security guards had fired guns, but said they had fired into the air to scare away people who were throwing stones and banging on the gates attempting to break into the factory's residential area: "They had iron pipes and were arming themselves with whatever was on the

ground."

Badly burned workers told an AFP news agency reporter that they had found doors bolted when they tried to escape. "Smoke filled everywhere and it was difficult to see any escape route," said 22-year-old Said Adesina, one of the injured workers being treated in hospital. "I had to descend the spiral staircase to the ground floor. When I got down, the three entrance doors were locked and I had to go back to look for another escape route," he said. He told AFP that only three out of the 40 workers in his section of the plant had survived.

Asukuo Umana, another survivor, said, "I work at the refining section. When I saw that the fire had covered the whole place and the main gate was locked, I jumped down from upstairs and ran towards the main gate (where rod is processed). The gate was locked." A Chinese resident came from his house and helped him to force the gate.

Anti-riot police drafted to the scene remained on guard until September 18.

Four days after the tragedy work to remove the debris of the factory under which other trapped victims might be hidden had not yet begun. General Manager Li blamed bureaucratic complications, saying "different agencies of government came up with contradictory directives on what was to be done before the exercise could commence".

Although various causes of the inferno have been suggested, the actual cause has not yet been ascertained. A senior company official cynically remarked to *This Day* that "disgruntled workers" could have started the fire.

Feelings are running very high in the area. The Commissioner of Police has implored members of the public to keep calm, saying that there will be a full investigation into the cause of the fire and how the workers were trapped inside the factories.

Dr Joe Okei Odumakin of the Campaign for Democracy said, “This unfortunate incident has raised a fundamental question about the premium placed on human lives by the Nigerian government, which could not ensure that maximum safety standards are complied with in the workplace.”



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