

At least 67 dead in Nigeria in stampedes for food assistance

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At least 67 people have been killed in a series of stampedes in Nigeria at charity events offering financial assistance and free food parcels. The tragic deaths come in the midst of a severe cost-of-living and food insecurity crisis across the country which has left millions of people struggling to access adequate food supplies.

On December 18, at least 35 children were crushed to death and many more were injured at a Christmas funfair held at a high school in the Bashorun district of Ibadan, Nigeria's third-largest city. The fair's organisers had invited children aged under the age of 13 and had advertised that cash handouts and food aid would be provided for all attendees, as well as giving children the opportunity to win prizes like scholarships.

Around 5,000 attendees had been expected, with organisers promising handouts of N5,000 (around \$3) to each child. Such is the desperation of Nigeria's increasingly impoverished population that at least 7,500 people arrived at the venue, with some news sources estimating that as many as 10,000 may have turned up. Many arrived at 5 a.m., several hours before the event's scheduled start time, while others reportedly slept outside the school the previous night to ensure they received handouts.

Eyewitnesses reported scenes of panic when parents and children rushed to enter the venue as organisers arrived. Victims became trapped in a crush at the main gate, leaving them with no way to escape the crowd as children fell and were trampled underfoot. Others tried to scale fences to access the event. The overwhelming turnout also caused gridlock on the road leading to the high school, complicating rescue efforts.

Only three days later, on Saturday, December 21, at least another 32 people were killed in crowd crushes at two separate charity events.

Of those, 22 people died in the town of Okija in the southeastern state of Anambra at an event organised by a local philanthropist to distribute food, including rice and cooking oil. Hundreds arrived at the venue, leading to a crush as crowds surged forward to try to claim the food aid. Victims of the stampede included "the elderly, pregnant [women], nursing mothers and children," Christian Aburime, Chief Press Secretary to the Anambra State Governor, said in a statement.

The same day, another 10 people, including four children, were crushed to death in the Nigerian capital city of Abuja, at a food and clothing distribution event for the vulnerable hosted by a local church.

Deadly stampedes are by no means new in Nigeria, although the number of incidents and fatalities appears to be increasing. In 2014, 18 jobseekers were killed at various locations across Nigeria as thousands of applicants attempted to enter venues for recruitment events. Thirty-one people were crushed at a Port Harcourt food distribution event in 2022, while another 20 died the following year at a rice distribution event in Ilorin, the capital of the western state of Kwara.

In 2024 alone, at least three other deadly crushes took place, all involving desperate individuals trying to obtain rice or other food or financial assistance. At least 17 died, although official death counts are rarely given and news reports often lack detail, so the real toll may be much higher.

In a statement on December's deadly stampedes, Nigerian president Bola Tinubu declared that he had cancelled his official engagements in honour of the victims and urged state governments and the police to enforce strict crowd control measures at festive and charity events. While much of the media reporting of these incidents has followed Tinubu's lead in focussing on poor planning and insufficient crowd control, the

main cause of the tragic deaths is the rampant poverty facing Nigerians across the country, exacerbated by the government's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures.

Since coming to power in May 2023, after an election marred by violence, fraud and other irregularities, Tinubu has introduced a raft of pro-market policies, including floating the Nigerian naira, previously pegged to the US dollar, and ending a decades-long fuel subsidy. This led to a rapid doubling of the price of petrol on which many Nigerians rely to generate electricity for their homes. Since then, the Nigerian currency has lost around 70 percent of its value, pushing inflation up to a 28-year high of 34 percent over the summer—and 40 percent for food—and sparking a crushing cost-of-living crisis.

Around 40 percent of Nigeria's population now live in extreme poverty, according to the World Bank—some 93 million people. Between October and December 2024, 25.1 million Nigerians were also estimated to be acutely food insecure by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), a figure which is predicted to rise to 33 million in 2025.

Around 5.4 million children and almost 800,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women in Nigeria are also at risk of acute malnutrition or wasting in six of the most affected states across the country—Borno, Adamawa and Yobe in the northeast, and Sokoto, Katsina and Zamfara in the northwest—according to the WFP. Of these, as many as 1.8 million children could face Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and require critical nutrition treatment, the WFP reported.

Food and transportation costs have been particularly impacted by inflation, tripling over the past 18 months. Beans, a staple food product for many Nigerian households, have skyrocketed in price, increasing by 283 percent between October 2023 and October 2024, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). The cost of rice has also shot up, with locally produced variants increasing in price by 153 percent over the same period.

Nigeria's food insecurity crisis has been exacerbated by protectionist government measures restricting food imports. Between 2015 and 2022, the government of president Muhammad Buhari, Tinubu's predecessor, introduced various measures that effectively banned the import of rice, as well as other foodstuffs, into Nigeria,

ostensibly to encourage local farmers to grow more of the crop. While rice production has increased, it is still far outstripped by demand, with farmers only able to fulfil about 60 percent of the country's rice consumption needs.

Climate change, particularly floods, has also severely impacted food production in Nigeria. Last year, just between October 1 and 15, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recorded that floods affected over 9.2 million people in Nigeria and submerged 4.5 million hectares of land, including approximately 1.6 million hectares of farmland. According to the FAO, flooding could lead to annual production losses for maize, sorghum and rice of 1.1 million tonnes—enough to feed 13 million people for a year.

Ethnic and religious conflicts have disrupted agriculture, too, particularly in northern Nigeria, where the bulk of food production occurs, interfering with supply chains and leading to food shortages across the country.

While Nigerians are particularly badly affected by food insecurity, the problem of hunger is a global issue. According to the latest State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) report, released in July, a staggering 733 million people faced hunger in 2023, equivalent to one in eleven people globally and including one in five in Africa. Global hunger levels have remained the same for three years and now include around 152 million more people than in 2019.

Only a frontal assault on the wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy in Nigeria, Africa and throughout the world can resolve these immense social and economic crises. This requires the mass mobilisation of the international working class, which produces all of society's vast wealth, to reorganise social and economic life along rational lines, to meet human need. This can only be conducted as part of a fight for socialism.



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