

Death toll in Sierra Leone fuel tanker explosion rises to 131



Health workers carry a coffin during the burial of 75 of the victims in Freetown on November 8, 2021, two days after a massive fireball sparked by a fuel tanker explosion killed more than 130 people in Sierra Leone's capital [Saidu Bah/ AFP]

Freetown, November 11 (RHC)-- The death toll following a devastating fuel tanker explosion last week in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, has risen to 131, according to authorities. Another 63 people were still being treated in four Freetown hospitals, with 19 of them being in a critical condition, Mohamed Lamrana Bah, director of communication at the government's National Disaster Management Agency, said on Wednesday.

The tragedy on Friday occurred on a busy junction in Wellington, eastern Freetown, when a fuel tanker was hit by a truck, which later caught fire. Victims included motorbike drivers who rushed to collect leaking fuel coming from the tanker, roadside female traders and commuters trapped in minibuses that were backed up along the usually busy road.

Posters with photos of the missing and dead have been stuck on walls and buildings around the site. More than 70 bodies were charred beyond recognition, and relatives of the missing told Al Jazeera that they are now assuming their loved ones were among them.

Large numbers of people attended a mass burial on Monday, where some 75 unidentifiable bodies were laid to rest in a cemetery that also holds victims of the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak and a 2017 mudslide, the country's worst natural disaster which killed more than 1,100 people.

Government officials said tissue samples taken from each of the bodies would be sent abroad for testing. "The corpses [were] numbered and tissue samples [were] also numbered before being taken for burial. These are being sent abroad for DNA testing and it could take some months for results to return," said Austin Kennan, the Sierra Leone country director for Concern Worldwide, a humanitarian organisation helping with the process.

"Graves are also being numbered so we can identify people in the coming months. We hope that this will bring some solace to those who have lost loved ones in this awful and heartbreaking tragedy."

In the initial days after the explosion, medics said they were running out of supplies to treat the wounded. The World Health Organization pledged 6.6 tonnes of emergency medical supplies. Bah said several countries had also offered to send in burns experts and clinical specialists. There has also been a blood drive, with locals encouraged to donate to "save the victims of the Freetown explosion."

Back at the site of the explosion, the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society was registering the relatives and spouses of the dead and wounded, many of whom are hoping for government assistance. "At this moment it is our opinion that it is not really timely for us to start making promises for what we can do for them but we will definitely come out with something," said Bah.

Identifying the correct families is a slow process, he added, because of concerns that people with no association to the incident could make false claims due to poverty or desperation. "We want to take our time so we find workable strategies," Bah said.

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