

**THE OCHANJA CENTRAL MARKET AND ONITSHA MAIN MARKET FIRE
DISASTERS OF 1984: CAUSES AND EFFECTS**

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Abstract

Crisis is either any event or period that will (or might) lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group or all of a society. Crises are negative changes in the human or environmental affairs, especially when they occur abruptly, with little or no warning. Over the years, the bulk of the society has been kept in the dark about the causes and effects of the fire disasters in the Ochanja market and the Onitsha main market of 1984. This paper is an attempt to bring to the fore, the causes of the markets fire disaster and the plausible way of avoiding a recurrence. The methodology of this paper is based on descriptive analysis of available data, using primary and secondary sources. The findings of the paper indicate that the Ochanja and Onitsha Main Markets fire disasters of 1984 wrecked a lot of havoc on the traders, leading massive loss of goods and alteration in the people's daily affairs. The study recommends among other things, the placement of fire extinguishers at strategic points of the markets, provision of fire service vehicles in the markets, and the removal of illegal structures in the markets.

Keywords: Crisis, market, Onitsha, disaster, fire

Introduction

Crisis, according to Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Current English, means a time of great danger, difficulty or confusion when problems must be solved or important decisions must be made; it is also a time when a problem, a bad situation or an illness is in its worst point¹. It can also be referred to a traumatic or stressful change for a person, or an unstable and dangerous situation for a society². Crisis is either any event or period that will (or might) lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group or all of a society. Crises are negative changes in the human or environmental affairs, especially when they occur abruptly, with little or no warning³. For the purpose of this work, the term crises,

will take the form of the major government policies that have affected the market policies; leadership disagreements that have negatively affected the peaceful existence of the markets in Onitsha; fire incidents that have destroyed goods and infrastructure in the markets; clandestine activities that have also negatively affected the free movement of goods and persons around the market areas; leadership tussles that went violent; wanton vandalism and other mayhem that may have in one way or the other, negatively affected the peaceful and smooth running of the markets. The researcher would also look at ways of averting such crisis for future occurrences.

Ochanja Market Fire Disaster of 17th December, 1984

The fire disaster that engulfed the Ochanja Market and the Onitsha Main Market, was believed to have taken place in the early hours of 17th December, 1984. The fire incident was reported to have started first at the Ochanja Market and thirty minutes later at the Onitsha Main Market⁴. It was also maintained that a near fire disaster would have occurred at the Ose and Bridge Head Markets on the same day, but for the quick intervention of residents around the market areas. The cause of the fire could not be ascertained easily as different people had varying reports on the matter. These reports, however, seemed to be speculations peddled around by rumour mongers, who seized every little opportunity they had to spread fake news.

In the case of the fire incident that occurred at the Ochanja Market, four different speculations were making the rounds as to the cause of the incident at the fire outbreak. They included the following⁵:

- i. that the fire started because of either some mosquito coil light, candle light or some cigarette stub that fell on the Dunlop mattresses used by the chief security personnel in the market;
- ii. that one of the night watchmen in the early hours of the fateful morning made fire to warm himself from the cold when the wind blew the fire into a nearby heap of trash and the fire spread into the market from there;
- iii. that the fire started because of explosion from an unattended electrical equipment at the food and drink session; and
- iv. the fire occurred because of arson, a malicious act by some unpatriotic and criminal traders/elements.

The truth, however, remains that no one knows the actual cause of the fire, because no person was present at the scene prior to the eruption of the fire⁶.

It is an established fact that the Ochanja Market fire incident had started from the textile section of the market which was close to the stall used by the chief security guard, Mr. Ali Atabo, as his place of rest but the actual cause of the fire could not be determined. It held that although the conflagration might probably be accidental, the possibility of foul play or sabotage on the part of criminally minded elements and enemies of peace and progress of the markets could not be ruled out; more so, when the two fire incidents occurred only within thirty minutes of each other⁷.

The fire incident started at the Ochanja market at about 5.30am on that fateful day and about 6am at the Onitsha Market. Shop owners at the market ran helter-skelter on receiving the news of the inferno in the attempt to see if their goods could be safe before their shops were gutted by the fire. As a result, some people were injured in the process. Before the services of the Anambra State Fire Service, who were summoned, could swing into action, the Ochanja Market had been completely razed down.

Inquiry into the Ochanja Fire Incident of 1984

After the Ochanja Market fire disaster, the Military Governor of Anambra State, Navy Captain Allison Amaechi Madueke, inaugurated a Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Ochanja Market and the Onitsha Main Market fires disasters on 18th January, 1985. The members of the commission were⁸:

The Hon. Justice Anthony I. Iguh	Chairman
Augustin E. Aliu (C.S.P.)	Member
Flt. Lt. Simmy E. Akko	Member
Edmund A. Echetabu (Retired Financial Controller)	Member
Onwuha C. Ezeako (Retired Chief Town Planning Officer)	Member
Samuel O.I. Ezenwugo (Administrative Officer, Grade I)	Secretary
Okoronkwo N.A. Enenchukwu (Principal State Counsel)	Counsel

The terms of reference given to the Judicial Commission of Inquiry included the following⁹:

- i. to investigate the circumstances and establish the causes of the fire disasters that occurred at the Ochanja and Onitsha Main Markets on 17th December, 1984;
- ii. to determine as far as possible the amount or extent of damage caused by each of the said two fire disasters;
- iii. to critically examine the performance, conduct or reaction of the State Fire Service or any officer or officers thereof in connection with each of the two fire disasters; and
- iv. to make recommendations for preventing or dealing with future fire incidents.

The Judicial Commission of Inquiry during its investigation interviewed fifty-five witnesses and paid several visits to the Ochanja Market; the Onitsha Main Market; the state Fire Service Station, Onitsha; the Onitsha Local Government Fire Unit at the Onitsha Main Market; the State Fire Service, Enugu; and the Fire Service, Station/Training/School at Idaw River Layout, Enugu¹⁰.

In the course of the investigation, the Commission of Inquiry discovered that the Ochanja Market was not planned and that traders constructed stalls indiscriminately with highly inflammable materials and without any provision for open spaces, drive ways, refuse dumps and toilets. It noted that there was not even one fire hydrant in the market and found that the market was overcrowded at the time of the fire incident with about two thousand, three hundred and seventy-three (2,373) original stalls and two thousand, five hundred and twenty-six (2,526) illegal stalls, attachments and structures¹¹.

The Commission described the Ochanja Market as “a bundle of inflammables” and noted that “all Insurance Companies declared the market uninsurable and declined to insure it¹²”. The Commission, on the other hand, rejected as unreliable the various versions and theories sought to explain the cause of the fire listed above, because, according to them, they did not contain credible evidence. They, however, were able to establish that the fire incident started from the textile section of the market which was close to the stall used by the Chief Security Guard, Ali Atabo, as a resting place, but could not ascertain the precise cause¹³.

The Commission also held that although the fire outbreak might probably be accidental, the possibility of foul play or sabotage by criminally minded elements and enemies of peace and progress could not be ruled out, more so, when the two fire incidents occurred only within thirty minutes of each other and a near blaze at Ose Okwodu Market and the Bridgehead Market. The Commission was also able to establish that the Ochanja Market fire disaster started at 0530 hours and clearly before 0600 hours and, that the security guards were supposed to be on duty at the time. The Commission, moreover, established that the night guards were around the market at the time the fire outbreak started, but the guards were either not keeping a proper and close watch over the market at the time the fire started, or that they, perhaps, knew more than they were prepared to admit before the Commission. It described as “clumsy and most unsatisfactory” the system by which the night guards were recruited. It took note of the non-involvement of the traders (the ultimate payers of the night guards) and the Onitsha Local Government that owned the market in the recruitment and supervision of the guards¹⁴.

The Commission further discovered that the individual reliability of the security guards was in question and noted that as an open place easily accessible from all sides that the effective and credible security of Ochanja market was not provided. It also found out that but for the blocking of all access roads to the market from a distance of about 200 metres; the individualism of the traders who were interested only in salvaging their personal wares and not in fighting the fire; the thick human population and the overcrowding of the market with highly inflammable stalls, attachments and structures, the state Fire Service units from Awka, Enugu, Nnewi, Onitsha and the Onitsha Local Government fire unit that fought the fire would have achieved reasonable success, notwithstanding the obvious handicap of the fire stations in terms of water availability at the market and apparent ill-equipment¹⁵.

The Commission in its inquiry and inspection found out that the physical destruction of the Ochanja Market as a result of the fire outbreak was 100 per cent destruction of five thousand and forty-eight (5,048) legal and illegal stalls, attachment and structures. The sum of one million, five hundred and two thousand, four hundred and ninety-eight (₦1,502,498.00) was approximated as the value of the stalls at the time of the conflagration. On the estimated value of the merchandise, goods and wares of traders destroyed by the disaster, the Commission could not arrive at a realistic estimate because most the affected

traders did not show much interest in that regard. However, it described the loss as “enormous and staggering” and “not unlikely to run into several millions of naira”¹⁶. The Commission also noted that two adult males lost their lives in the fire disaster.

On the conduct of the State Fire Service regarding the Ochanja Market fire incident, the Judicial Commission of Inquiry after careful study of the entries in the Occurrence Register, kept by the Service Stations, held that the action of the Fire Service Stations to the Ochanja Market fire disaster was reasonably prompt. The Commission, however, considered the complete absence of fire hydrants at the market, the inaccessibility to the base of the fire by the Fire Service as a result of obstruction posed by illegal stalls, attachments and structures, planlessness of the market, abandoned vehicles and traders wares together with the uncontrollable and thick crowd at the scene as a very serious constraint to the efforts of the firemen to fight the fire. It noted that the fire was fought by the combined team of Firemen from Onitsha, Nnewi, Enugu and Awka fire unit¹⁷.

Based on the above findings, the Commission made recommendations to the government of the state for preventing or dealing with future fire incidents. The recommendations included the following:

- i. that Onitsha Local Government should embark on immediate reconstruction of Ochanja market according to a proper plan and design using fire resistant materials and, provide the new market with adequate safeguards against fire hazards as well as adequate setbacks and access roads;
- ii. that the Onitsha, Idemili and Anambra Local Governments should initiate plans for the construction of Ochanja market;
- iii. that all big markets should be provided with independent boreholes and overhead tanks;
- iv. that the employment of security guards for the market should remain in the hands of traders;
- v. that no alterations, amendments or modifications of market plans should be effected by any local government without reference to and approval in writing of all the appropriate authorities which include, the local government, the Ministry of Local Government, the State Fire Service and the Ministry of Works, Lands and Transport;

- vi. that the Fire Service should be involved in the planning and location of fire hydrants in all markets;
- vii. that all night guards should be registered with the relevant Local Government giving their specified personal particulars;
- viii. that all night guards should provide guarantors or sureties to vouch for their honesty and reliability and produce them on demand;
- ix. that all the guards should have identity cards;
- x. that all agents recruiting security men must be registered with the Local Government they serve;
- xi. that the night guards should not be allowed to load or off-load vehicles within the markets they were deployed during their official work hours;
- xii. that the Ochanja market and other markets in the State should where possible, be properly wall-fenced and provided with adequate security gates;
- xiii. that market should open for business at 6am and close at 6pm;
- xiv. that only the night guards should be allowed in the market after 6pm;
- xv. that no trader should be allowed to load and off-load in the market after 6pm or before 6am;
- xvi. that the storage and sale of all explosives or highly inflammable materials like carbides, gunpowder, knockouts, gas, chemicals, paints and fuel in the markets should be banned and special areas be provided outside the markets for their sale;
- xvii. that First Aid fire extinguishers for immediate use in cases of fire emergency should be mounted at strategic positions in the market and each trader encouraged to have a portable fire extinguisher in his stall;
- xviii. that all cooking should be banned in the markets;
- xix. that the use of naked light and cigarette smoking in the markets should be banned and "No Smoking" signs exhibited conspicuously at all approaches to the market;
- xx. that no advertisement board should be allowed anywhere within the markets or the vicinity of the markets;
- xxi. that there should be only one central control of electricity supply to the market with only two main switches, one for control of lights in the stalls and the other for security lights at night and that only security lights might be on after 6pm;
- xxii. that indiscriminate throwing away of refuse in the markets should be strictly prohibited and metal dust-bins with fitting lids be provides in all

- sheds and stalls while the Local Government should ensure regular disposal of refuse in the markets;
- xxiii. that the Local Governments should strengthen their market administration units with proper emphasis on the enforcement of safety regulations relating to fire prevention methods such as the erection of illegal stall, attachments and structures, blocking the passage ways, escape routes, open spaces, fire hydrants, sumo sites and so on;
 - xxiv. that all markets in the State with up to 3,000 stalls should be provided with well-equipped Fire Units and Police Posts;
 - xxv. that the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Matters and the Local Government should jointly undertake recruitment of staff of market fire units for the Local Governments concerned;
 - xxvi. that the operational control of the Local Government Fire Units should come under the State Fire Service command in time of emergency;
 - xxvii. that each Fire Station should be adequately equipped with fire engine, utility vehicles, water tankers, fire hydrants and sufficient lengths of water hoses and, lined with functional telephone lines including "199" and with basic radio equipment for ease of communication;
 - xxviii. that fire engines should be used for fighting at all times and not for administrative and other errands; and adequate provision should be made for protective clothing of firemen;
 - xxix. that the Fire Service Stations should have their own fuel dumps as a long-term plan;
 - xxx. that Government should seriously consider the establishment of more and preferably four Fire Stations each in Onitsha and Enugu respectively;
 - xxxi. that a fire Prevention Law or Edict be promulgated and delegated, in appropriate areas, to the Fire Service for enforcement;
 - xxxii. that officers and men of the fire service should be trained regularly on modern equipment and fire prevention tactics;
 - xxxiii. that Government should without delay complete, equip and commission the Idaw River Fire Station/Training School at Enugu for use;
 - xxxiv. that the Fire Service should organise regular fire drills and basic fire prevention/fighting lectures, and the traders should be taught how to use fire extinguishers and what to do in times of fire emergency;

- xxxv. that the State Government and the Local Governments should be provide residential quarters/barracks close to the fire Stations for Firemen and that serious consideration be given to the allocation to firemen of the staff quarters near Enugu Fire Station;
- xxxvi. that a standard and well-equipped mechanical workshop for the servicing of and repairs to Fire Service vehicles and equipment should be provided in Enugu as a matter of urgency;
- xxxvii. that a greater measure of autonomy should be granted to the Fire Service and greater delegation of functions be made at the Divisional Fire Officer level;
- xxxviii. that some percentage of the cost of equipping the Fire Units and providing fire prevention first aid equipment in the markets be borne by the traders indirectly through appropriate charges in stallage fee, etc;
- xxxix. that all markets should as a matter of policy be made acceptable for insurance through proper designs, planning and construction and, be insured¹⁸.

On the submission of the recommendations by the Commission of Inquiry to the government, the government accepted the recommendations except items (xvi) and (xxx) which it only noted, and (xviii) and (xx) which it rejected. With respect to recommendation (v), the government was of the view that markets should be used as planned and designed without any additions that would result in overcrowding or obstruction. Local Governments it noted would be required to pass by-laws making it an offence to erect illegal stalls and other structures.

Government acceptance of the recommendation (iv) it also observed, was subject to the review of the system of recruitment of security men and night guards. In rejecting recommendation (xviii), government was of the view that it was neither practicable nor desirable to ban all cooking in the markets. Special areas or facilities should be provided for cooking and serving meals in the markets in the form of canteens, properly controlled and inspected regularly it added. With respect to recommendation (xx), government felt that it was only necessary to require that all advertisement boards be made of metals and fire resistant materials.

Finally, the government directed the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Matters to pursue the implementation of the recommendations accepted in liaison with the relevant local governments¹⁹.

The Onitsha Main Market Fire Disaster of 17th December, 1984

The fire incident at the Onitsha Main Market on 17th December, 1984, started about thirty minutes after the Ochanja Market fire outbreak started. Just as the case of the Ochanja market, no one seemed to know the actual cause of the fire²⁰. Seven different accounts were, however, speculated as the cause of the fire. They included the following:

- i. that the unhealthy rivalry between two factions of the Onitsha Market Amalgamated Traders Association (OMATA) created room for the fire disaster;
- ii. that Chief F.N. Asoanya and his gang set fire on the main market;
- iii. that some Onitsha indigenes set fire on the market;
- iv. that the fire was caused by an explosion in the market;
- v. that three or four young men alighted from a 504 saloon car, scared away the night guards with gunshots and set the market ablaze;
- vi. that the market was set ablaze by some traders who were adversely affected by the operations of the state task force on environmental sanitation; and
- vii. that the electrical power failure of 17th December, 1984, at exactly 1729 hours and a few minutes to the conflagration, was part of the grand design by the criminal conspirators²¹.

The same Judicial Commission of Inquiry, which investigated the Ochanja Fire disaster, investigated the Onitsha Main Market fire disaster. The Commission noted that when the Onitsha Main Market was designed and constructed, it was almost fire proof but was later made “a fertile ground for fire outbreak” by some Chairmen/Sole Administrators of the Onitsha Local Government, who approved indiscriminate conversion of all available spaces, refuse dumpsites, car parks, sumo pumps, escape routes, buffer spaces, toilets and fire hydrant sites into illegal stalls, attachments and structures. It found that those illegal erections were built with highly inflammable materials. The Commission also discovered that the time of the fire outbreak, there were a total of five thousand, two hundred and eleven (5,211) stalls at the market out of which about two thousand (2,000) were illegal stalls, attachments and structures²².

The Commission viewed the above accounts as to how the fire was triggered as speculative, and, therefore, rejected them. It, however, observed that some criminal act or sabotage could not be ruled out, much as the identities of human

agents involved were not disclosed by evidence. The Commission believed that the fire started from Bay No.7 of the market between 1830 hours and 1900 hours and spread with tremendous fury and rapidity²³.

As in the case of the Ochanja Market, the Commission found that the employment of night guards for the market was most haphazard and unsatisfactory, and that the identities and particulars of the most of the night guards were unknown. It noted that the men, who were supposed to keep watch over Bay No.7 where the fire started, disappeared and could not be traced and brought to testify before the Commission by their recruiting agent²⁴.

The Commission expressed its disappointment with the record of the investigations conducted by the Assistant Superintendent of Police, Mr. Ime Nelson Udofia of the State Police Criminal Investigation Department, into the criminal aspects of the fire incidents and observed that the only statements he was able to obtain were from the Chairman and Secretary of OMATA respectively, persons whose evidence did not appear particularly useful in the investigation. On the other hand, the Judicial Commission was of the opinion that Witness No. 1 and Divisional Police Officer for Onitsha, Mr. Taiwo must be commended for the conscientious manner in which he tackled with and executed his duties in the matter of the fire incident. It was also noted that Mr. Taiwo was fully geared up for the full scale investigation with regard to the cause of the conflagrations when he was ordered to hand the investigation over to the State Central Investigation Department (S.C.I.D), on 18th December, 1984²⁵.

The Commission considered the massive presence of illegal stalls, attachments and structures on every available space and on the 17 No. fire hydrants in the market as having contributed immensely to the cause, and rapid spread of the fire. It noted that the conflagration was contained by the joint action of the Fire Service men, the Police, the Army and some public-spirited individuals. It blamed the following as the cause of the fire disaster²⁶:

- i. the past Chairmen/Sole Administrators of Onitsha Local Government for giving indiscriminate approvals for erection of the obstructions;
- ii. the carefree attitude of the traders in conniving with the Chairmen/Sole Administrators;
- iii. the stubbornness of some traders; and

- iv. the inactivity, connivance and failure on the part of the Local Government Council officials to enforce the relevant Council bye-laws.

The Commission found that about two thousand, four hundred and thirty-seven (2,437) out of the five thousand, two hundred and eleven (5,211) legal and illegal stalls, attachments and structures in the Onitsha main market were destroyed by the fire. Based on the detailed professional assessment of the damage by the State Ministry of Works, Lands and Transport, the Commission held that the damage to the original structure of the market was forty per cent²⁷. It held that the traders must have sustained enormous and staggering losses. It found that the Onitsha Local Government realised the sum of two million, one hundred and sixty-two thousand, three hundred and fifteen Naira (₦2,162,315.00) revenue from the market annually and observed that with the loss of forty per cent (40%) of the market, the loss to the Local Government in the stallage fees would be considerable. The Commission also noted that a male adult was lost in the fire incident²⁸.

The Judicial Commission of Inquiry was satisfied that the reaction of the State Fire Service to the Onitsha Main market fire incident was prompt, despite that several traders who suffered personal loss from the fire disaster and their sympathisers accused the Fire Service men as being lazy and indolent. It held that the State Fire Service together with the Onitsha Local Government Fire Unit arrived at the scene of the fire with the utmost zeal and to the best of their strength and ability in the face of the obvious handicaps constituted partly by²⁹:

- i. poor equipment and lack of basic facilities;
- ii. the problem of mobility and accessibility to the base of the fire in the market; and
- iii. inability to reach the fire hydrants.

Based the above information gathered by the Commission, it made the following recommendations to the government (amongst other general recommendations already mentioned amongst Ochanja Market recommendation)³⁰:

- i. that the Onitsha main market should be generally reconstructed according to its original plan or such other amended or improved plan as the appropriate authorities might consider fit;

- ii. that the reconstructed main market must do away with all illegal stall, attachments and structures and must mainly be constructed with non-combustible materials;
- iii. that adequate number of fire hydrants of the elevated and not of the concealed type, with some accompanying hose reels be located at conspicuous, strategic and easily accessible places in and around the main market;
- iv. that serious sanctions should in the future be imposed on any Chairman or Sole Administrator who constructs illegal structures at the market and his collaborators;
- v. that any member of staff of the Local Government involved with or connived at the infringement of any fire preventive measures should be severely dealt with.

Armed with the report, the government commended the Chairman and members of the Judicial Commission for their job well done. It noted the recommendations of the Commission and unequivocally condemned the activities of Barrister Obiekwe Aniweta, former Chairman of Onitsha Local Government, on the construction of illegal structures in the Onitsha Main Market, thereby contributing indirectly to the damages caused by the market fire of December, 1984³¹.

Conclusion and summary

The presence of markets has immensely contributed to the socio-economic development of the society, as it contributes to the revenue generation of the government through the payment of tax by the traders. Profits made from sale of goods in these markets have also contributed to a raise in the per capita income of the traders, who through the profits amassed from trade pay their stallage fees, house rent, build houses, buy car (s), provide food for the family and pay the tuition fees of the children. Looking at the responsibilities that is being shouldered by sales from the markets, it is obvious that the destruction of the Ochanja Central market and Onitsha Main market by a 100 per cent and 60 per cent level, meant the subjection of traders who were before the incident wealthy men who could provide the needs of the family to poverty level. Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

- i. removal of illegal structures from the markets;
- ii. provision of fire-fighting gadgets at strategic positions in the markets
- iii. provision of fire service vehicles in the markets.

End Notes

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