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Cleaning up in Lagos

Carien du Plessis @City_Press #Nigeria

21 September 2014 15:00

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The SA National Defence Force (SANDF) will today send its first plane to Nigeria to begin repatriating those killed and injured when a church guesthouse collapsed in Lagos, Nigeria last Friday.

Government spokesperson Phumla Williams said the repatriation of up to 84 dead and an unconfirmed number of injured South Africans would be handled by the SANDF.

Government says it will not release the deceased's names without families' permission.

While the heartbreaking task of bringing home the bodies begins in earnest, South African diplomats are scrambling to smooth the SANDF's path in the face of serious animosity on the ground in Lagos.

Nigeria's This Day reported yesterday that 86 people died at the guesthouse belonging to charismatic preacher TB Joshua.

TALKING POINT



DA challenges SABC's Ellen Tshabalala to face the music

The Democratic Alliance has urged SABC chairperson Ellen Tshabalala not to resign and rather face a parliamentary inquiry that she lied about her qualification.

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Joshua has called the victims “martyrs of the kingdom of God”.

A South African diplomat, who did not want to be named, suggested that negative stories pouring out of Nigeria after the collapse could create difficulty in bringing the dead and wounded home.

“It is a sensitive period and if you discuss politics, in a way that will undermine the environment we are working in now,” he said.

Nigeria President Goodluck Jonathan visited the church yesterday morning and for the first time publicly expressed his condolences for the victims after a two-hour telephone conversation with President Jacob Zuma on Friday.

Officials said they could not disclose what the presidents said to each other in those two hours.

A Nigerian diplomatic official said Jonathan’s visit was largely about local politics (there is an election in five months’ time and Jonathan is expected to stand for a second term).

“Anything religious is a very sensitive issue in Nigeria as it may cause a riot,” the Nigerian official said.

Lagos State, where the church is, has a Muslim governor, Babatunde Fashola, who is not sympathetic towards Jonathan.

A Nigerian businessman told City Press that Jonathan supporters feel the South African government was deliberately trying to portray the administration as weak because of Zuma’s friendship with presidential hopeful and former Nigerian vice-president Atiku Abubakar.

The Nigerian Tribune reported yesterday that officials felt Pretoria had undermined the Jonathan administration by unilaterally announcing the South African death toll of 67 on Tuesday night. At the time, the death toll announced by Nigerian authorities was 60.

Officials also said South Africa’s sending rescuers to Lagos showed up the Jonathan administration as having a weak response to emergencies.

Recently, diplomatic friction increased when Nigeria rebased its economy and overtook South Africa as the continent’s largest economy.

On home soil, Nigerian diplomats have been supportive and respectful.

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VOTE

Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande has condemned the violent protests at the Tshwane University of Technology saying “there is a criminal element in operation here”. I think ...

- Swift action needs to be taken against anyone who contributed to the violence
- Students have the right to protest
- The minister should intervene and not wait to be approached
- The students have been pushed to the extreme because no one is listening to them

VOTE **VIEW**
RESULTS

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The Nigerian High Commission in Pretoria and the consulate in Joburg flew their flags at half-mast this week out of respect for the dead.

Deputy High Commissioner Martin Cobham said officials had been working overtime yesterday to give visas to victims' families.

"We are cooperating with South African state authorities to facilitate movement from here to Nigeria. A rescue team went to complement our own locals back in Lagos. We have eased visa requirements [for rescue workers and families] and waived the R6 000 repatriation fee," he said.

The fee is a requirement for first-time visitors to Nigeria.

But journalists are still awaiting security clearance by Nigeria's ministry of information that would allow them to travel to Lagos to report on the tragedy.

Local diplomats said their hands were tied without authority from Abuja, which can be granted in a matter of hours.

Williams said as far as she was concerned, there were no strained relations between South Africa and Nigeria.

"If the Nigerians were uncooperative, our rescue teams wouldn't have gone there," she said.

On Wednesday International Relations and Cooperation Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, in her official statement, made no mention of the Nigerian's government involvement in the rescue mission.

But by Friday, the interministerial task team set up to deal with the tragedy acknowledged that the Nigerian government had been helping with the rescue efforts.

Church member Pieter van Zyl, who went to help with the rescue efforts this week, said he was unaware of any friction between rescue teams.

He also said reports of secrecy from Joshua's Synagogue Church of All Nations team after the tragedy were wrong.

In the days following the collapse, "there were bulldozers and tractors driving up and down on the site, and rescue workers were operating drills and heavy machinery", Van Zyl said.

"If you let the crowds in to take pictures on their cellphones, it would have delayed the rescue efforts or more people could have been killed."

He said suspicions by the church that the collapse was caused by a terrorist attack also meant security was tighter than usual.

“It wasn’t the construction [of the building]. Our church has been on the site in [the Lagos suburb of] Ikontun Igbe for 30 years, and there has never been a building collapse.

“We get engineers and planners to advise us before we build,” he said.

Terrorist attacks have been fairly common in the north of Nigeria in recent times, but Lagos, in the country’s south, has so far been unaffected.

Van Zyl said Joshua had sent out a team of South African and Nigerian “Christ workers” to reach out to affected families.

“He is sending spiritual and financial support to families,” said Van Zyl, who is part of the effort.

The CEO of international rescue experts Kenyon International, Robert Jensen, said crowd control was one of the biggest problems when doing a rescue of this type in Nigeria.

“That causes more difficulty,” he said, because of the heavy equipment involved.

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