

Transport strike paralyses Lagos, Nigeria

Our correspondent
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A strike by commercial transport operators in Lagos that began on Monday has continued throughout the week. The transport operators withdrew their vehicles from the roads in protest against the government's hike in tariffs as well as the extortion and harassment they face from law enforcement agents.

Both transport and other economic activity in Nigeria's main commercial centre, with around 8 million inhabitants, ground to a halt and thousands of commuters have been unable to get to work because of the strike.

There are reports of several deaths in strike-related clashes. Three buses were damaged in Egbeda/Akowonjo. Two people were killed and several people wounded in the area. Police had a hard time putting down the riot and by 11:30 Wednesday morning, violent battles still raged in parts of the city.

There was no movement of vehicles in the busy Abule Egba, Ikeja and PWD areas, while at the Apongbon area of Lagos Island, two vehicles were reportedly burnt. Another person was killed there. Trouble in these areas started when some bus drivers, despite the strike action, still continued to ply their routes, picking up passengers. Their colleagues then protested, and physical attacks were made. In Iju, over 60 anti-riot security police took action to stop effective picketing. In the ensuing clashes, at least eight people were feared killed Monday, while several others were injured. Members of the Lagos State Rapid Response Squad (RRS) are now patrolling most parts of the metropolis.

Many commuters in the sprawling city did not venture out on Tuesday after Monday's harrowing experiences. Tens of thousands of others had to trek long distances to their destinations. Those who made use of private cars got caught in increased traffic jams.

A peace meeting called late Monday by the Lagos state governor, Ahmed Bola Tinubu, with leaders of the

commercial transport operators apparently ended in a stalemate. While the transport operators accuse the authorities of hiking transport tariffs, such as permits, by about 500 percent, the governor insisted that the increases, which he said were irreversible, were only between 20 and 60 percent. The transport operators said they would rather keep their vehicles off the roads than pass the increase on to commuters. The strike is also in opposition to plans by the state government to introduce mobile courts for traffic offences, and extortion by police and other security agencies.

In a new and potentially dangerous twist to the crisis, the Lagos chapter of the National Association of Road Transport Owners has threatened to withdraw petrol tankers from the roads. Their spokesman Ganiyu Azeem said the group would be forced to withdraw their tankers if the current dispute was not resolved soon. This could trigger fuel scarcity and further compound the already bad situation in the city.

This crisis comes hard on the heels of last week's violent ethnic clashes between members of the Yoruba O'Odun People's Congress and Ijaw youths in the Lagos shanty town of Ajegunle, in which more than 12 people were reported killed and scores of houses burnt down.



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