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Abuja, Nigeria â?? December 24, 2024

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At least 13 people, including four children, were killed in two separate stampedes in Nigeria as large crowds gathered to collect food and clothing items distributed at annual Christmas events, the police said Saturday.

The two accidents came days after another such stampede in Africa's most populous country, amid a growing trend by local organizations, churches and individuals to organize charity events ahead of Christmas, as the country struggles with the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

Ten people were killed in the first stampede in the early hours at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Maitama, an upmarket part of the capital, Abuja, police spokesman Josephine Adeh said in a statement, adding that more than 1,000 people have been evacuated from the church.

There was a crowd surge at one of the church gates, as dozens tried to enter the premises at around 4 a.m., hours before the gift items were to be shared, witnesses said, pointing out that some had been waiting since the previous night.

"The way they were rushing to enter, some people were falling and some of them were old," Loveth Inyang, a witness. Inyang said he managed to rescue one baby as his mother struggled in the surge.

Three people died in a similar crush later in the southeastern Anambra state's Okija town at a charity event organized by a philanthropist, the state police said.

"The event had not even started when the rush began," police spokesman Tochukwu Ikenga said. There could be more deaths recorded as officers investigate the incident, he said.

Viral footage that appeared to be from the Abuja scene showed lifeless bodies lying on the ground as people shouted for help. Some of the injured have been treated and discharged while others continue to receive medical care, police said.

The church canceled the charity event with bags of rice and clothing items still arranged within the premises.

As the church held a marriage ceremony after the crowd was evacuated, the agony and sadness remained palpable even as families and friends gathered for wedding pictures.

Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu expressed his sympathy with the victims' families and asked states and relevant authorities to enforce strict crowd control measures.

The recent stampedes in Nigeria have raised questions about safety measures in such events. Several children were killed on Wednesday this week when a local foundation organized a well-attended funfair to distribute gift items and food to kids in southwestern Oyo state.

After the latest disaster, the police in Abuja announced that prior permission must be obtained before such charity events are organized.

The current economic hardship under Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, who promised "renewed hope" when he was sworn into office in May 2023, is blamed on surging inflation that is at a 28-year high and the government's economic policies that have pushed the local currency to record low against the dollar.

Frustration over the cost-of-living crisis has led to mass protests in recent months. In August, at least 20 people were shot dead and hundreds of others were arrested at protests demanding better opportunities and jobs for young people.