Accra Abattoirs' crisis

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By Joe Bradford Nyinah

THE safety of meat on the Ghanaian market, particularly those slaughtered locally, has been a source of concern over the years.

Butchers slaughtering animals on the bare ground and burning off the fur with lorry tyres is an unsightly scene that is common in places like James Town and others in Accra and its surroundings.

Apart from the eyesaw it creates in the city, this way of preparing meat for human consumption is unhygienic and has serious health consequences.

To tackle these problems and create the required hygienic environment for the slaughter and preparation of animals for the domestic market, the government sought assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency for a grant of $4.3 million to put up a modern abattoir. The Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) provided the local construction cost by equity.

When the project was finally commissioned in 1998, there was great optimism that at long last the people of Accra and beyond would have access to wholesome meat.

Today, anyone who visits the elegant facility at community 18 will wonder why all that money was sunk into a project not only to let it stand idle but also pose environmental and health danger to the people.

Anyone who visits the vicinity is immediately greeted by a nauseating stench. This is the result of the Ghana Water Company's cut of water supplies to the abattoir. Prior to that, the waste collection company that serviced the area had not collected the refuse over a period, resulting in a pile-up. The recent rains, therefore, provided a catalyst for the production of that stench. Pools of water that had gathered at the entrance to the company were infested with maggots.

Butchers, who, due to the lack of water could not send their cattle there for slaughter, went into some patches in the neighbourhood to slaughter the animals, thus further compounding the problem.

According to workers of the company, their salaries are in arrears for close to seven months. Morale amongst them is at its lowest ebb. Not only that, the workers, most of whom are not too conversant with the structures of the organisation, blame management for their woes and, therefore, threaten their security.

The company is owned by the Government of Ghana, which owns 51.36 per cent shares, SSNIT with 36.60 per cent shares and the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) 7.19 per cent.
Other share holders are Masai and the Butchers Association with 4.84 per cent and 0.02 per cent share holdings respectively.

It is surprising that a company with the kind of facilities such as that Abattoir should face such problems.
In fact inquiries have revealed that the company never received a cedi for operating capital at its inception and had to rely on service slaughters to raise money to operate.
Given that at the initial stages it operated a number of departments and a fleet of cars, which needed to be regularly serviced, it would have been a miracle if the fee of ¢16,000 charged per cattle slaughtered had kept the company afloat.

The lack of initial operating capital is not the only problem that has haunted the company to this day.
At the inception of the project, butchers protested, particularly against the demolition of the makeshift and unhygienic slaughter house at James Town.

Butchers in Accra therefore refused to patronise the facility and given that service slaughter is the primary business of the abattoir, this move by the butchers was sure to undermine the whole project.

To compound the problem, the AMA and the Tema Municipal Assembly (TMA) have permitted the slaughter of animals at unauthorised places in spite of existing bye-laws that prohibit this.

The modern installation at the facility and their under-utilisation resulted in high operational cost in terms of utility and other charges.

If the abattoir itself had money to finance the purchase of cattle for production, the problem would have been minimised.

By last October, it is estimated, the company's total liability had gone up to ¢598 million. In addition about ¢138 million was said to be needed to undertake capital expenditure on the plant to ensure that capacity could be built to meet service requirement should the butchers be made to patronise the facility.

It must be noted that the abattoir, as was planned, was meant to be a social service institution which was to ensure that meat for the city is properly handled. This is not to say that the company should not make profit but with the current situation it would be unrealistic to expect that anything meaningful can be done unless certain bold measure are adopted.

The government must compel the AMA/TMA to stop the butchers from slaughtering at unauthorised places. The Veterinary Services, the Regional Health Services Directorate and other such bodies must have representation on the Abattoir Board to ensure that the necessary legislations are enforced to bring the facility back to life.

Looking at the conditions at the abattoirs now, one should not be surprised if an epidemic foot and mouth or other animal disease breaks out.

The consequence will be dire indeed. That is why all stakeholders need to take action to address the Abattoir problems.

In order that the investment does not go waste, the shareholders need to provide the required recapitalisation, which according to the Managing Director of the company, Mr Emmanuel Simpson, should be at least ¢2.5 billion.

To avoid the recurrence of the present problems, the commercial status of the company must be changed after recapitalisation to enable the company to function as a commercial entity instead of a social service organisation.