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Letter to Yakubu Gowon (1)

By Angelicus Onasanya, Steve Ogbonmwan and Yemi Oyeyemi

DEAR, retired General Yakubu Gowon, We write this letter in response to a speech delivered recently on your behalf by Alhaji M.D. Yusufu, at the second anniversary seminar of the Arewa Consultative Forum. It is our hope that you will view the contents with the utmost consideration they require and deserve.

First, Your Excellency, please note, that of all the Nigerians who have had the privilege of serving Nigeria as heads of state, your tenure is generally regarded as the most favourable. Most Nigerians would readily agree that your regime was the most humane of all Nigeria's military administrations. Second, you are the only living former head of state not known to be a billionaire, and that endears you to many Nigerians. And finally, most of us note with gratitude your unrelenting prayers for the welfare of Nigeria. For these reasons, whatever you say about Nigeria deserves to be received and considered with utmost respect.

It is for these reasons that very many Nigerians feel very deeply about the opinion you expressed in the speech under reference to the effect that there are "four groups" trying to destabilise Nigeria, and that these are as follows:

- "idealists who cannot wait to see a perfect Nigeria ... (who) agitate for the cancellation of the 1999 Constitution on the premise that there is too much concentration of power and resources at the centre.
- those who want to see the country balkanised into small territories to be headed by tribal leaders... made up of demagogues and other anarchists who will sooner take Nigeria back to the chaos of the 18th century.
- those who desire the country's break-up into "geopolitical territories, whereby big ethnic groups may swallow up small ones without a challenge".
- those who demand "a new constitution that will allow them keep 100 per cent of money derived from the sale of oil that is extracted within their territories."

In short, Sir, your opinion of all who challenge the status quo in Nigeria today is wholly negative. As far as you are concerned, all who challenge the status quo or who ask for a serious look at Nigeria as it is, are despicable elements who are simply impatient with the pace of Nigeria's evolution, or are demagogues and anarchists whom no system of order can satisfy, or ethnic chauvinists who want their own large ethnic groups to dominate smaller ethnic groups or who simply do not want the resources of their own ethnic territories shared with the rest of Nigeria. While there are, without doubt, some persons who may answer to these characterisations, we urge you most respectfully, Sir, to look deeper below the surface. When you do that, you will find that probably most of the persons who are actively asking for change for Nigeria, or who are intensely dissatisfied with Nigeria as it exists today, are motivated by very positive and commendable purposes – persons who, in your own words, seek "perfection", perfection and meaningful order out of the near chaos that Nigeria now is. Such persons do not deserve opprobrium but acceptance and encouragement from all far-sighted Nigerians. Another Nigerian, Peter Ekeh, in a paper titled: "Urhobo and the Nigerian federation: Whither Nigeria?" demonstrated a clear understanding of the realities of today's Nigeria when he said: "It is an indication of the stress and turbulence of our times that Nigerians are everywhere re-examining the purpose of the Nigerian state and the relationships between their ethnic groups and the Nigerian federation. There has been no other occasion in our history when men and women, otherwise engaged in professions far removed from politics and public affairs, been so concerned of their ethnic groupings and about the purpose of their country's political arrangements."

The truth, Sir, is that most informed Nigerians, and very many friends of Nigeria in the world, are intensely worried about the way Nigeria has turned out to be. That is why speeches, articles and even books about Nigeria's future are being churned out increasingly today. And that is why the pages and editorial columns of Nigerian newspapers are

continually littered with the evidence of the stress and the turbulence raging in the minds of thinking Nigerians concerning Nigeria.

The most important question, then, is this: What are the roots of Nigeria's very profound sicknesses – Nigeria's intractable political instability, the intense criminality, fraud, and violence in Nigeria's political processes, the political assassinations, the all-pervasive and resolute corruption in the management of the nation's public resources, the disregard for law, etc. There are some who would opine that the causes of these aberrations are simply human greed, the lack of patriotic leaders, or even a weakness in the make-up of the moral and societal consciousness of Nigerians. This is tantamount to saying that, before the British came and favoured us with the creation of Nigeria, we were all morally, socially and politically deprived and incapable peoples, intrinsically unable to produce solid and respectable leaders of men or to manage orderly political entities.

But people who hold such opinions must ask themselves certain important questions. The Hausa people, long before the 19th century, created for themselves a number of splendid kingdoms, and their rulers ruled those kingdoms with dignity and poise. If they were deprived and incapable, how did they accomplish such things? In the course of the 19th century, the Fulani and Hausa peoples carried out a revolution that produced a larger, more inclusive polity, (a Caliphate), whose leaders promoted knowledge, excellence, commerce and pride. If they were deprived and incapable, how could they achieve such great things?

The Nupe on the Middle Niger and the Tiv on the Benue, though not very large peoples today, were very strong peoples, each of whom built a strong kingdom and managed with distinction the trade, and the channels of trade, across its own river. In the forest country of the south, the Yoruba built one of the most advanced civilisations of tropical Africa, established well ordered and gorgeous kingdoms throughout their expansive territory, built walled towns and cities, and evolved the greatest urban civilisation in the thick forests of tropical Africa – all of which were already far advanced before the first European explorers came to the coast of West Africa in the 15th century. The Edo and related peoples had also established one of Africa's most prestigious kingdoms before the first Europeans came to the coasts of West Africa – a kingdom that, today, would have owned more territory and more population than each of Belgium, Portugal, and many other countries of Europe. Astride the Lower Niger and east of it, the Igbo people evolved supremely well ordered democracies and produced a civilisation rich in art, culture and commerce – and are today one of Africa's most dynamic and most modernising nations. Similar comments as these are also true of the Ibibio, the Ijaw (builders of the city states of the Niger Delta), Urhobo, and many other small, but deservedly proud, nations in all parts of Nigeria. If these peoples were deprived and incapable, how did they achieve the orderly political systems and impressive civilisations that they achieved?

No, the true explanation for Nigeria's huge, stubborn, and perpetually worsening diseases is to be found not in any inherent flaws in us as peoples, but in circumstances created by the very existence of Nigeria itself. To understand that, one needs to look at what has happened, and what is happening, in countries similar to Nigeria in the world – countries comprising two or more ethnic nations. The apparently almighty Soviet Union perpetually suffered serious distractions from the desires of its many ethnic nations to manage their own affairs. Ultimately, in 1991, the Soviet Union splintered into many countries – 15 in all, each of them an autonomous and independent nation state, most of them very small. The Czechs and Slovaks of Czechoslovakia had the common sense to terminate the complex problems of Czechoslovakia by breaking it up peacefully – so that each now lives in its own small independent country. Yugoslavia, created in 1918, was one country riddled with subliminal hostilities, corruption and instability. When two of the ethnic nations of this country announced their decisions to secede, the Serbs, who happened to be Yugoslavia's largest ethnic nation, took up arms in order to prevent the breaking up of the country, but all they succeeded in doing was to cause horrendous violence and bloodshed, thereby attracting worldwide condemnation. In the end, each of the various ethnic nations of Yugoslavia did win its own small country – a total of seven countries, the smallest of which has a population of only 864,000. The Walloons and the Flemings, the two ethnic nations of Belgium (a country

created in 1831), have, in recent times, been constantly at loggerheads. (To be continued tomorrow)

Onasanya, Ogbonmwan and Oyeyemi are Nigerian professionals in the diaspora

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Letter to Yakubu Gowon (2)

By Angelicus Onasanya, Steve Ogbonmwan and Yemi Oyeyemi

(Continued from yesterday)

Following a troubled election in 2007, the Walloons and the Flemings seem now to be heading for eventual break up of Belgium into two countries. Great Britain entered the 20th century as a country of four ethnic nations – the English, Scots, Irish, and Welsh. The Irish broke off in the 1920s and created the independent Republic of Ireland. (The small province of Northern Ireland which was not allowed to go with the Republic of Ireland has remained a scene of terrible troubles since then). Both the Scots and Welsh are also agitating for independent countries of their own, and the Scots now seem to be near that goal. Spain comprises two ethnic nations – the Spaniards, and a smaller nation, the Basques. For many decades, the Basques have troubled and shaken Spain in an attempt to break off and have a country of their own. In Russia, one small ethnic nation, the Chechens of Chechnya that was not able to break off in the 1990s, and in Georgia, the small people of South Ossetia, are both fighting life-and-death struggles in order to have tiny independent countries of their own.

At the United Nations, this reality has become fairly well understood. And that is why in September 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution entitled "Declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples" by indigenous peoples", the United Nations means ethnic nations that are members of larger countries. In its preamble, the resolution states as follows:

"- - - the Charter of the United Nations, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action, affirm the fundamental importance of the right of self-determination of all peoples, by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural independence."

As far as the countries of Africa are concerned, clear and unambiguous demands and agitations for separate countries are still rare. And the reasons are obvious. First, the African countries are still quite young – being generally about 50 years in existence. Second, most of the ethnic nations of Africa are very small – so small that many can not yet envision themselves as constituting separate independent countries.

As a result, every African country is buffeted and battered by political turmoil, sordid corruption, wrong-headed attempts by some nations to dominate others, rigged and violently protested elections, lawlessness, pogroms, ethnic cleansing, genocide, etc. But all these are bound to change, and the confused and indefinable storms will give way to clear visions and demands. The peoples of Africa are becoming more and more literate and educated; and the immaturity and lack of confidence will gradually evaporate. Already, in Nigeria, where some of the provinces rank among the most literate in Africa, the desire for separate independent countries is becoming unmistakable. Naturally, it is difficult for those of us who would want to preserve Nigeria to contemplate, but there is no way we can avoid the situation whereby increasing numbers of the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Edo and related peoples, Kanuri and related peoples, Nupe, Tiv, Ijaw, Ibibio, as well as combinations of neighbouring small

peoples, will seek separation of their peoples from Nigeria in order to have countries of their own. Again, there is nothing bad or wicked or condemnable about that and those of us who oppose such outcomes only need to work hard for what we believe to be more meaningful and peaceful change.

Of course, the tortuous political and moral mess of Nigeria tends to serve, for now, as the immediate major provocator of such views and the rising agitations for separation. For many whom education has elevated to membership of the wider community of the world, it can be sometimes unpleasant these days to be identified as a Nigerian. But the deeper, ethnic nationalist, causes are also affirming themselves. Even if Nigeria were much better run, the ethnic nationalist factor will still advance itself. Throughout the 20th century, Great Britain has been one of the richest, most powerful, and proudest countries in our world, and yet the ethnic nations in it have wanted to break away from it. The same is true of Spain, Belgium, Canada, etc. The expansion of agitations for the dissolution of Nigeria seems inevitable, regardless.

Your Excellency, we urge you to see this whole matter from one further perspective. Trying to heal Nigeria's diseases with a Nigerian wand has never worked, and it will never work. Military regime after military regime thought that the way to solve Nigeria's problems was to pursue a centralizing, unificatory and integrationist path. Well, they succeeded in centralising and integrating, but that made the problems of Nigeria enormously worse.

Needless to say, the solution is not more centralisation, or the fostering of more, or other, super-powerful political groupings. The solution is to restore control to the people – to empower the people to nurture again a leadership that is produced by the people and that serves the people. And there is no other way to accomplish this than by empowering each ethnic nation to call out its traditional ethical norms and laws and cultural influence for the guidance of its own affairs. There is no other conceivable way to get it done.

Your Excellency, is this growing demand what you were reacting to and castigating in your statement when you spoke of "idealists who cannot wait to see a "perfect Nigeria," and who "agitate for the cancellation of the 1999 Constitution on the premise that there was too much concentration of power and resources at the centre"? Is this what you were referring to and demonizing as the voices of "demagogues and other anarchists who will sooner take Nigeria back to the chaos of the 18th century", who want "to see the country balkanized into small territories to be headed by tribal leaders", who "desire the country's break-up into "geopolitical territories, whereby big ethnic groups may swallow up small ones without a challenge", and who are "asking for a new constitution that will allow them keep 100 per cent of money derived from the sale of oil that is extracted within their territories"? We really must urge you, Your Excellency, to rethink these sentiments.

(Concluded)

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