

LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT



Congress of Racial Equality

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December 26, 1995

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20050

Dear Mr. President:

We were members of two large, diverse African-American delegations that visited Nigeria recently. We are concerned about the increasingly strained relations between the government of Nigeria and our country. For the sake of fairness, accuracy, balance, and harmony between our peoples, please allow us to address you on that subject. We bring to this discourse, hopefully, an equally eloquent (and dramatic) but more informed view - opposed to that which alleges to represent the African-American position on Nigeria.

We will not attempt to challenge every critique of Nigeria or of the Government of Gen. Sani Abacha in this brief address. But we will challenge the most egregious ones, such as, the flawed analogy equating apartheid South Africa with Nigeria. This error we believe, could cause Nigeria to suffer penalties that had been more justly applied to apartheid South Africa. We also hope to encourage a paradigm shift in the way America and the developed democracies of the Western world view developing countries like Nigeria.

If Nigeria (or any developing country) is to be judged fairly, one is compelled, morally and intellectually, to take transition from colonial domination. Nigeria is a large complex, heterogeneous state in search of the road to stability, economic viability, and democracy. It is subject to the same political evolutionary forces that Europe witnessed after the decline and withdrawal of Rome from its provinces in the early centuries A.D. Many centuries were needed for today's prosperous, stable, European democracies to evolve politically. Even today, many states around the world that were freed from external political and military domination have not yet evolved into stable democracies.

From its inception, God has blessed America: Except for Blacks, who were mostly slaves, the population of the young country was relatively homogeneous in religion, culture, and language. When America freed itself from British colonial rule, it had already adopted and institutionalized many social, economic, and political institutions that had taken the mother country (England) centuries to evolve. We must not measure the misfortune and misadventures of Nigeria's political evolution through a paradigm of our good fortune. More accurately, we must use models that are relevant to Nigeria and to most nations emerging from colonial domination with similar problems.

Our delegations - consisting of clergy, journalists, and civil and human rights professionals from around the country, travelled extensively and unhindered throughout Nigeria, including Ogoniland. The following are observations and conclusions arrived at mutually by members of the delegations:

- 1) All Nigerians expressed a longing for democracy and an end to military rule.
- 2) Almost all Nigerians - supporters and non-supporters of the present government believe that Gen. Sani Abacha is a man

of his word and that his government is necessary to stabilize the country, at this time, to save it from slipping into civil war.

- 3) Almost all Nigerians, again supporters and non-supporters - commented favorably on the October 1, 1995 speech of Gen. Abacha and believe that his plan for transition to democratic rule in Nigeria is viable and achievable.

- 4) Overwhelmingly Nigerians believe that their country is being singled out unfairly for pressure by America and the international community. Therefore, they welcome the involvement of African-Americans as mediators in the dispute between the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the government of the United States of America.

Our observations and conclusions refute the notion that Nigeria is the political and moral equivalent of apartheid South Africa: No such observations and conclusions could have been made about South Africa during its regressive period, apartheid. Nigeria is engaged in political evolution - apartheid South Africa was not; its political institutions were counter evolutionary. South Africa had established a racial oligarchy to preserve privileges for its white minority. Nigeria's government - admittedly a military one - is drawn from all parts of the country, and it does not serve the interest of any one interest, racial, or religious group.

The casus belli that led to shrill calls for increased diplomatic and economic pressures to be imposed on Nigeria was the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa. But was this a fair issue around which Nigeria should be penalized? Based on evidence obtained mostly from the Ogoni people in Nigeria and on honest reading of our own early and present day American history, we confidently answer NO! It is not our intention to demonize Mr. Saro-Wiwa; he advocated many good things. But like any of us, he had his flaws.

While the Ogoni people struggled peacefully to improve the quality of life in their home area, Ken Saro-Wiwa advocated (and even employed) methods that led to rebellion and murder in Ogoniland. It was not for the advocacy of good and necessary things that Mr. Saro-Wiwa was arrested, indicted, tried, convicted, and hanged. It was for his advocacy (and use) of methods that led to rebellion and murder in Ogoniland.

In America's early history, several rebellions were suppressed by the Federal government. One of the most violent and murderous ones, the John Brown rebellion in 1859, was the precursor that ignited the Civil War - the largest and most violent rebellion in our history. Like Ken Saro-Wiwa, John Brown advocated a good thing - freeing the slaves. But methods that led to rebellion and murder. John Brown was captured (by Col. Robert E. Lee, and officer in the Federal Army of the United States, but later, the commanding general of the Confederate army) tried, convicted, and hanged one month later. John Brown was an immensely popular hero to the many abolitionists in America and abroad, as is Ken Saro-Wiwa today. Numerous appeals to save Brown's life were made to the authorities, but all were rejected or ignored.

The legitimacy of the tribunal that convicted Mr. Saro-Wiwa and eight of his associates and that sentenced them to death by hanging, has been questioned by environmentalists, enthusiasts of Chief Mashood Abiola, and by some civil and human rights professionals. But those critics of the tribunal have presented no evidence to support that notion; they have presented only ad hominem arguments. Civil disturbances tribunals have been used as forums of justice in Nigeria for many years, surviving several governments, including the regime of Gen. Obasanjo. They are

not pseudo-legal devices concocted by the government of Gen. Sani Abacha, as has been insinuated by his enemies. Ken Saro-Wiwa was tried, convicted, and sentenced for the murder of four Ogoni Chiefs who opposed his violent methods and his secessionist schemes, under the Civil Disturbances (special tribunal) Act, as amended in 1990. He was not tried by a military tribunal nor was he court-martialled. Two of the three judges on the tribunal were civilians from the Federal Court of Appeals, the third member of the panel was a military lawyer. The court was headed by one of the civilian judges.

Supporters of Ken Saro-Wiwa have called the trial disparagingly a summary proceeding, when in fact, it took the panel eight months to convict nine of the fifteen defendants - acquitting the remaining six. The Nuremberg (WWII) tribunal needed only eleven months to try twenty four German war crime defendants. In contrast, in our country, John Wilkes Booth's co-conspirators in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, Mary Surratt and her associates, were tried by a military court in Washington, D.C. that took less than eight weeks to convict all nine defendants. The court, led by Major Gen. Lew Wallace, the author of Ben Hur, sentenced four of the conspirators to hang. At the urging of President Andrew Johnson, Abe Lincoln's successor, Mary Surratt and three of her associates were hanged - just forty eight hours after they were convicted.

Nigeria is a young country, in its 35th year. Is it fair to condemn and to punish Nigeria for operating as we, as a nation, did at twice that age? Mistakes will be made, but it is exactly at those times that more contact is indicated, not less. More help should be offered, not sanctions! Nigeria is not a vestal virgin, but neither was America in its 70th plus year, neither America today, nor England, nor Nelson Mandela's South Africa. Machiavelli was right: No nation or government is pure. Nigeria should not be judged by a double standard; it should be judged by the same standard that is reserved for those countries with most favored nation status.

Nigeria is inexorably on the road to democracy. We should help to accelerate the process, not break the momentum. The Abacha government has announced a measurable timetable for elections. Let us monitor it. It allows Nigerians time to adopt, invent, and institutionalize democratic instruments at local, state, regional, and national levels. Let us not blame Sani Abacha for the cumulative sum of the mistakes and wrongdoings of the previous civilian and military governments. To do so is not just wrong, it is dishonest and unfair.

Finally, Mr. President, we can agree that regardless of which side one is committed to in the Nigerian debate, the voice of Ken Saro-Wiwa should not be heard to the exclusion of the voices of the four murdered Chiefs, for whose deaths he was convicted. The voices of Mr. Saro-Wiwa's wife and children should not silence the voices of the widows and children of Chief Edward Kobani, Chief Samuel Orage, Chief Albert Badey, and Chief Theophilus Orage - the murdered victims of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Sincerely,

Roy Innis
(For Members of the Delegations)