

The fanatics murder sleep

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By Okey Ndibe

PhotoPeople stand around the Kingdom Heritage School Sunday, Feb. 19, 2006, at the city of Maiduguri, Nigeria, after it was damaged during protests on Saturday. Thousands of Nigerian Muslims protesting caricatures depicting the Prophet Muhammad attacked Christians and burned churches in northeastern Nigeria, killing at least 15 people, police and residents said.

In murdering dozens of innocent people in Maiduguri, Borno State, the rabid fanatics who posed as a pious mob yet again burnished Nigeria's reputation for excelling in impunity. A report by Njadvara Musa for the Associated Press told it all: "Nigerian Muslims protesting caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad attacked Christians and burned churches on Saturday, killing at least 15 people in the deadliest confrontation yet in the whirlwind of Muslim anger over the drawings."

In effect, in one fell swoop, the butchers of Maiduguri bested all-comers in bloodiness and savagery. They broke the world record for the largest tally of casualties since aggrieved Muslims around the globe began demonstrating against an irreverent cartoon drawn by a Danish cartoonist. The cartoon in question, depicting the Prophet

Muhammad as a death-dealing terrorist, appeared several months ago in a Danish newspaper. Muslim ire against the profanation of Islam's iconic figure has led to widespread arson and deaths in such major Islamic addresses as Libya, Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Afghanistan. Even so, until the mayhem in Maiduguri, the casualties had stayed mostly within single digits, and had usually come from the stampede of demonstrators retreating from police fire.

Trust some Nigerians to bound for the stage and claim a dubious, gory title. As it happened, the initial toll of fifteen dead was a gross understatement. By Sunday, estimates of the dead had surpassed fifty—and the number was widely expected to rise. The agents of death in Maiduguri seemed determined to set a record that the rest of the indignant Islamic world combined could never dream of threatening. Not only did they covet the Guinness Book of Records, they made an audacious bid as monopolists of savagery. And all this, we are meant to believe, supposedly for the love of their prophet?

Let's call what happened by its proper name: unholy crap compounded by impious carnage. In their blind fury, the Maiduguri mob behaved as if they had

received divine revelation that the Danish cartoonist was hiding somewhere in their blood-hungry city, disguised as a pastor or some Igbo trader. Rabid and vengeful, they fanned out, combing churches, business stalls and the homes of infidels. They snuffed out and mutilated unarmed citizens, men and women, children as well as grown-ups. Their victims' only crime, or should we speak of sin, was belonging to a different ethnicity and religion. In a country where the president's chief attack dog has declared that non-believers don't really count as full humans, these avengers of the prophet had no qualms destroying the lives and property of those they considered of errant faith. To ensure that the masked Danish cartoonist did not escape, these killers by presumed divine mandate mowed down as many "suspects" as could they lay hands on. In their wake was a charred city littered with corpses and filled with grief, bereft of hope.

Once again, Nigerians are left wondering what, at bottom, drove this orgy of violence, this banquet of blood? It could not have been holy rage at a cartoon that reasonable people everywhere agree was in poor taste. If the killers, maimers and arsonists of Maiduguri were out to rebuff a Danish reviler of their faith, they might have taken other paths. For one, they could have done what other protesters elsewhere in the world did: targeted the Danish embassy or the economic interests of Denmark. They might have symbolically burnt the Danish flag, sworn off Danish goods, or even pronounced anathema on Danish citizens. Instead, they picked on the softest targets around.

I bet that the majority of those who lost their lives in this senseless and inexcusable affront knew little about the Danish cartoon. I'm even willing to wager that many of them would have disapproved of the cartoonist's temerity. Given the steep decline of Christianity in Europe, there is a good chance that the offending cartoonist, far from being a Christian, is an equal opportunity traducer of all sacred traditions.

The blight in Maiduguri invites Nigerians to serious soul searching. What has been exposed here, once again, is the very incoherence of the Nigerian idea. Those who are victimized by these periodic descents into gratuitous, bloody madness cannot be convinced, by any twists of logic, that Nigeria is a sound proposition. A state that lacks the capacity, or will, to protect the lives and property of all citizens cannot long persuade its citizens to repose faith in that nation's viability.

The menace in Maiduguri is the latest sordid chapter in an established and obscenely bloody pattern. In late 2001, shortly after U.S. troops began their bombardment of Afghanistan to dislodge that nation's Taliban rulers and their Al Queda guests, miscreants in several northern cities, rallying under the banner of Islam, set upon Nigerian Christians, slaughtering more than five hundred. How did the Nigerian state respond? With conspicuous nonchalance and cold indifference, thank you. Traveling abroad while his country burned, President Olusegun Obasanjo told the foreign press that he was not surprised that some religious extremists would use the U.S. blitz as a pretext "to make a statement." It

is a tragic nation whose leader would euphemise the deaths of hundreds of citizens as an innocuous "statement." The next year, even more Nigerians perished as some zealots made their own "statement" against their nation's hosting of an international beauty pageant.

Last week, in the aftermath of the cartoon wars, Abuja sunk to a new low in cold-blooded indifference. A headline in The Guardian of February 20 was emblematic of the disconnection. "Presidency, leaders advise against religious riots," went the caption. Noting that the death toll had risen to 51, the report informed readers: "The Presidency as well as religious leaders yesterday deplored the development and called for restraint."

Who spoke for the Presidency? Rest assured, not the president, for the man was no doubt too busy overseeing the perfection of his third term plot to bother with a trifle as marginal as Maiduguri's "statement." Never mind that this macabre statement was scribbled with the blood of scores of innocents. Aso Rock's reaction was voiced by Information and National Orientation Minister, Mr. Frank Nweke Jr. Had not a single life been lost in Maiduguri, the minister's statement would still have struck me as unforgivably tepid. In the event, the ministerial statement was insouciant, nothing short of shocking, indeed an insult to the dead, the maimed and the bereaved. Said Mr. Nweke: "The situation out there is regrettable. The Federal government, while it does not begrudge any group the right to defend their faith and religion, also believes that certain actions such as burning of churches and

all of that are not the best way to protect their belief and faith." You don't say!

If the presidency won't be aroused to outrage and decisive action, where then does hope lie? Suggest the police and you'd provoke Nigerians to pained laughter. Of course the police announced that 144 suspects had been arrested in Maiduguri. They also implored citizens to "go on with their normal lives." Indeed! Only those unfamiliar with the odious record of prosecuting killer squads of religious fanatics and arsonists would be tempted to applaud. When a nation's highest political authority glamorises those who presume to kill in God's killers as mere makers of "statements", it should surprise no one that participants in this horrific spree are hardly ever prosecuted.

Wish the nation had astute leaders, secular and spiritual. It is the place of adept political leaders to create a society that is impregnated with hope, a polity where recourse to violence would be unattractive. Nigeria, alas, is unlucky in that department. It falls to Islamic clerics to exemplify the point that their faith espouses peace and good will. It is time they drilled this message into those within their fold quick to reach for the axe and bayonet. This indiscriminate killing of innocents must cease, or Nigeria faces the peril of a bloodier whirlwind.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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