

Woes at the U.S. consulate

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By Okey Ndibe

It may take a while for Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala to find her stride as Minister for External Affairs, but here's an issue she can (and should) attend to with all alacrity: the deplorable treatment meted out to Nigerians seeking visas to travel to the United States. She should, without delay, impress on the U.S. consular section in both Abuja and Lagos that Nigerian visa applicants abhor the degradations to which they are routinely subjected.

One is well aware of the fact that U.S. officials reserve the right to issue or deny visas. No reasonable person would contest that right. America happens to be the fantasy address for many Nigerians, and if U.S. consular staff were to bestow visas on every Nigerian who asked, then we would witness something akin to a mass exodus out of Nigeria. There is a jejune perception, sadly shared by too many Nigerians, of America as a country whose streets are awash in dollars. In the imagination of many, all it takes to strike it rich is to arrive in any American city!

This species of fantasy shares kinship with a certain mythology of communism that captured my imagination in my days of callow ignorance. I became a fervent "communist" the instant I overheard a conversation between two men. One of the men was describing life in a

communist system. "Communism means that every thing is owned in common," the explainer said. "Nobody locks a house or a car. You can walk into any mansion and choose the best bed to sleep in. If you see a Rolls Royce, you can enter it, turn the ignition and drive off to any destination." Intrigued, the sole auditor then asked if it meant that there were no poor people in communist countries. "Everybody is rich," asserted the first man, "so nobody is poor." I was at the time a mere primary school pupil, but the story made something within me quicken with yearning. I wished that my patch of earth, Nigeria, could be instantaneously transformed into a communist paradise! It would be some years before I was disabused, equipped with knowledge of the untidiness of communism. Until that chastening moment, I had laboured under the illusion that communism had achieved absolute banishment of poverty by dint of joint ownership of property.

My own history of naïve gullibility enables me to understand what triggers the widespread notion that America as a nation is sans destitutes. I well understand that it falls to U.S. visa officials to thwart many visa seekers who appear driven by desperate faith in the myth of America's inexhaustible prosperity. What's inexcusable, indeed callous, is when Nigerians with

demonstrably legitimate reasons for visiting the U.S. are shown the red card, often on grounds no more sound than the simple whim of an ill-trained consular staff.

It would be understandable if there were discernible criteria for rejection. I know of the case of a woman who had traveled extensively in Europe, with numerous trips to America to boot, but denied a visa to visit her son and daughter-in-law and see her young grandchild. Despite her established record of returning to Nigeria after varied trips, this woman was told that she was a risk to stay back in the U.S. How more ridiculous could things get?

Last week, I received a ring from the relative of a Nigerian lawyer with a good practice in Lagos. Five years ago, pregnant at a fairly advanced birthing age, her doctor had advised that she travel to England or the U.S. to deliver her baby. The reason, quite simply, was that medical facilities and care in Nigeria were substandard, and her doctor felt that it would be risky to subject herself to natal adventure in Lagos. Once in the U.S., she ensured that she paid all her pre-and post-natal medical fees. She was scrupulous in not making herself a burden on American public health budget. Her son, now five, carries an American passport. Yet, she was turned away when, her son in tow, she went recently to the consulate in Lagos to apply for a visa to visit the States on vacation. The officer who interviewed her had first asked whether she paid for her medical treatment. She affirmed that she had, and proceeded to submit all her receipts. Yet, her interviewer told her

that, since her son is American, she could not be trusted to return to Nigeria. This woman has a thriving legal practice and represents many international clients. She's been traveling to Europe since her secondary school days. Yet, she was given no time to press her case. She was up against an all-powerful visa officer whose no has the finality of divine decree.

Worse than the cavalier denial of visas to eminently deserving Nigerians is the absence of a humane avenue for appeals. For many Nigerians, then, a visit to the American embassy or consulate is akin to a walk through a veritable minefield. Even when your credentials are impressive, when you command the kind of traveling record that proclaims you no risk to abuse the generosity of your host nation, there is little or no basis to be confident of clinching a visa. It all depends, finally, on the instinctive call of one consular officer. If you feel abjectly treated, or perceive yourself the victim of outrageous caprice, too bad for you. There is no effective, timely mechanism to enable you to voice your resentment or seek redress.

I am told that the U.S. visa officials now target Nigerian women who came to America to give birth. If this is true, then the Nigerian government and people have every reason to protest this impunity. Pray, what is wrong in one coming to America to have a baby? Do Americans not travel to other countries to have their babies? Was that not exactly what the over-exposed actress known as Angelina Joie did in Namibia only a few weeks ago? By the alleged norm of the

U.S. consulate, both Joie and father-of-the-baby Brad Pitt qualify to be declared persona non grata in Namibia? Why should Nigerians be treated as criminals, or undesirables, simply for choosing America as the address to have their babies? It'd make sense if the U.S. set out to punish visitors who, new-born baby in hand, bolted without paying their medical and other bills, leaving American insurance companies or the public to pick their tabs. Such delinquent visitors, it is clear, deserve to be entered in the log of permanently excluded guests. But to adopt a blanket policy of turning away anybody who ever had a baby in an American hospital strikes me as obtuse.

By shutting the door in the face of Nigerian mothers of American babies, the U.S. discriminates against these innocent U.S. citizens. In fact, the policy's effect is to consign the babies born in America to Nigerian mothers to a degraded class of citizenship. Though as American as the man or woman stamping "rejected" on their mothers' passports, these kids are, by force of a patently misconceived policy, denied visitation rights to their natal nation. It is nothing short of cruel and unusual punishment, indeed conduct unbecoming of any civilized nation. What would U.S. officials tell these damaged kids when they grow up and demand answers? "We were so aggrieved by the fact that your Nigerian mother gave birth to you in America that we decided to bar the gate to both she and you – until you came of age." Is this the kind of ideal that a nation founded on the idea of human equality willing to sell to its unfairly ghettoized citizens? Ngozi Okonjo Iweala should be asking why Nigerians who

break no laws in America are blacklisted by the U.S. embassy.

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
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About Okey Ndibe



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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