

A blood-soaked garden

Monday, 20 August 2007

By Okey Ndibe

A few days ago, a friend rang me at home, his voice quavering with apprehension. "Okey, what's happening in Port Harcourt?" he asked.

He wasn't asking me for details of the bloody events in the bustling address that once prided itself as Nigeria's garden city. He knew what I knew: that the once idyllic Port Harcourt was now a scarred place, a war zone, a city soaked in blood. He knew that the city was under siege, thousands of citizens displaced. He was aware that its once quiescent boulevards and avenues were now ruled by marauding militiamen and by the fierce soldiers deployed to dislodge them. He knew that sudden death by bullet was now a generalized hazard for the city's trapped, hapless residents.

Anybody who's followed Nigerian news for the last week or two would know that the city abbreviated as P.H. has fallen into grave sin. It has eaten of the fruit of death, and death stalks its streets. A headline in one of Nigerian dailies told it all: "4 Task Force soldiers, 40 others killed in Port Harcourt shoot-out Thursday."

It was as if, all of a sudden, Nigeria had got its own homemade Baghdad. Except that it didn't happen all of a sudden, but mutated over a long time.

My friend's question was not a cry to be filled in on the gory details. He was merely asking that I help him make a

sense of it. What's happening in Port Harcourt?

I gave him the best retort I could muster. Port Harcourt's violent convulsion, I suggested, was sired by all the promissory notes the Nigerian state had failed to redeem. Port Harcourt is a metaphor for a deeper, more pervasive malaise. Mini-Port Harcourts are playing themselves out, will play themselves out, in other Nigerian cities, towns and villages.

With characteristic insouciance, the Nigerian state has styled the dealers of death in Port Harcourt as cultists. As terms go, this one is empty, just another shorthand to achieve obfuscation. A friend who lives in Port Harcourt, one of those who must brave the hell of the city's streets each day, offered a version of events that's remarkably different from the officially sanctioned one. He told me something that many residents of Port Harcourt—and Rivers State in general—believe. He reminded me that the men publicly associated with militancy in the state—men like Asari Dokubo, Ateke Tom and the recently slain Soboma George—were first mobilized in 2003 by politicians desperate to snatch elections. In courting the militants, the politicians made them grand promises. They pledged to take care of the boys once political victory was secured by force of arms.

It is an open secret that the militants then went to bat for their political sponsors. Coaxed and goaded by their hirers, the boys hounded their hirers' political opponents. They maimed, threatened and killed. They hijacked ballot boxes and stuffed them for their paymasters. They put their lives on the line to help enthrone their recruiters by foul and bloody means.

Yet, once ensconced in the comforts of their swanky offices, the politicians distanced themselves from the boys who had fought—literally—and often shed their blood—again, literally—to secure their unearned mandates. Giddy with victory, and seduced by the prospects of keeping the company of contractors and fellow raiders of the treasury, the politicians sought to flush away the thugs they'd recruited, armed and pressed to unholy service.

But the lesson of history is that monsters, once willed into existence, don't go away easily. Armed to the teeth, the largely unemployed, demobilized bunch began a terrifying war for turf. Then they found lucrative business in abducting expatriate oil company workers for ransom. As their business prospered, many more unemployed but armed young men gravitated into the abduction industry.

Let's look at it this way: Human beings must eat. They must eat, one way or another. Most people, I'm willing to bet, would work for their food, but if work is not an option—as it is not for a growing number of Nigerians—then they will steal, kidnap, 419-nize for it. In a polity where opportunities for legitimate livelihood are few and getting fewer, it

requires little clairvoyance to predict a high crime rate.

Nigerians are a betrayed people, a people betrayed by their so-called leaders. I'd include in the bracket of the betrayed those young men (and I imagine young women as well) who've made Port Harcourt ungovernable. The tragedy of Nigeria is to have at the helm of its affairs men and women who would scarcely be nastier had they been zealous officials of a suzerain determined to destroy Nigeria. The examples of treachery abound everywhere one looks.

The same week Nigerian newspapers were awash with accounts of the reddening of Port Harcourt, there was a report in the Tribune to the effect that Patricia Ette, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, was rallying fellow members to some splurgy location in the American State of Maryland to mark her 54th birthday. If true, this would have been a most galling, obscene and insensitive time for such a high-ranking official to frolic. A day after the report, a member of the house offered a denial and clarification. The speaker, he assured, was not in the U.S. to engage in revelry but to keep a date for medical check-up.

I for one have begun to see this canard of medical check-up for the insulting arrogance that it is. Some of the best Nigerian doctors, banished into exile by former military rulers and politicians, are offering first-rate medical care in Europe, North America, Asia and even in some African countries. Not one Nigerian politician that I'm aware of has come up with a plan to entice these extraordinary and well-trained practitioners home. If Madame Speaker Ette has any legislative vision for providing a semblance of

sound medical care for Nigerians, she must have done an excellent job of keeping it a secret. But her minders didn't see the cruelty of flippantly informing us that she is in the U.S. for medical check-up.

Etteh is, of course, far from alone. Announcing foreign junkets on medical grounds has graduated into one of the latest status symbols among the nation's rulers and parvenu. In the heat of the last presidential campaigns, Umar Yar'Adua was whisked off to a German hospital for treatment. His handlers later disclosed that he had gone to have a common cold attended to. Not to be outdone, Abubakar Atiku contrived his own medical interlude. Beset by a twisted ankle, he flew abroad to have it checked out. In neither case did it occur to both men that it reflects poorly on the image of the country if its doctors are deemed incapable of treating colds and sprained ankles.

Disgraced former governor of Bayelsa, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, was recently convicted of stealing billions of naira from the state coffers. As a condition for his light sentence, he agreed to forfeit his illicit hoard. A few days after his release, the former governor was on the plane to Dubai for medical treatment. How about the millions of his constituents whose resources he mindlessly stole? What plan does he have to send each and every one of them who falls sick to Dubai to enjoy the same marvels of medical care? Why should the traitors get away with lavish care and lead sumptuous lives when those they betray and disinherit are sunk in despair and mired in destitution?

A joint task force of soldiers and police officers are patrolling Port Harcourt,

charged with the mandate of reclaiming a broken, bloodied city. For the sake of the innocent residents of the city, one hopes the task force's mission would be successful. Even so, one nurses this sneaking suspicion that armed reclamation is doomed from the outset. There is an analogy between the task force and American soldiers patrolling violence-prone Iraqi neighborhoods. Just as so-called Iraqi insurgents often bring a quality of surprise and sneakiness to their attacks, the militants of Port Harcourt have the advantage of preemption. But this is only one technical matter.

On a broader note, Port Harcourt must be seen as a symbol of a deeper ailment. For a long time, life in Nigeria has been brutish, nasty and short—and getting worse by many indices. Citizens of an oil-producing nation with a right to expect a measure of social comfort—good roads, potable water, regular power supply, medical care and sound education—have been consigned to a denuded, discounted existence. The antidote for the rash outbreaks in Port Harcourt and elsewhere in Nigeria is for the public sphere to be dramatically energized with policies calculated to revamp the social environment and make Nigeria a livable space. If this is not done, the joint task force will labor in vain.

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
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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
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20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
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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

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail (okey@okeyndibe.com) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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