

A summit of provocation

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By Okey Ndibe

Let me make a prediction: Umaru Yar'Adua's regime will regret its decision to act with the hauteur of an army of occupation with regard to the Niger Delta. Nowhere is the government's imperial mindset as manifest, and offensive, as in the insistence that Ambassador Ibrahim Gambari must chair the so-called stakeholders' summit in the Niger Delta. That posture is nothing short of a provocation, and Yar'Adua as well as his advisors cannot claim ignorance of that fact.

The idea of Gambari at the helm of the summit is as cynical as the appointment of Justice Muhammed Uwais as head of the electoral reform panel. On paper, Uwais' credentials as a former chief justice of the federation would appear impressive, but he is hardly an inspiring fit for any serious effort to fix the crisis of electoral malpractice. Uwais' judicial validation of the 2003 presidential election was, to put a mild face to it, questionable and controversial. My hunch is that former President Olusegun Obasanjo's ability to get away with the electoral heist of 2003 fertilized the ground for the much grander rigging that took place last year. At the very least, Yar'Adua ought to have known that Uwais was far from the most persuasive name to bracket with electoral reform.

Gambari labors under the same manner of deficit. The man has earned his reputation as a formidable scholar. He

may even be an astute diplomat, even though I harbor my serious doubts. Whatever his gifts, he is a demonstrably poor choice to lead any summit on the Niger Delta. His apologia for the Sani Abacha regime after that dictator hanged Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni activists ought to disqualify him.

Gambari's defenders could argue that he was simply doing his job when he characterized the hanged men as common criminals deserving of their punishment. But there's a price a man must pay when he peddles such an appalling defense of official barbarism. There's also a tragic aspect to Gambari's misreading both of the domestic as well as international reaction to Abacha's butchery. Even if one were to allow that the hanged men had committed crimes, Gambari knew that the tribunal that found them guilty was a kangaroo one. The real crime was one perpetrated by the Nigerian state against men who had set out to use largely peaceful means to protest the ecological devastation and economic impoverishment that had become the lot of their fellows.

The callous killing of the Ogoni activists yielded the Nigerian state a false sense of imperial domination. For the inhabitants of the oil-rich delta, especially the youths, the hanging was a pivotal moment. It revealed the Nigerian government's disdain for justice. It exposed the determination of the parasitic elements

feed fat on the nation's resources to resort to brutish means to preserve their illicit privileges. In what's now a nightmare for everybody, it suggested to the upcoming group of activists that violence ought to be the default mode for the struggle.

On Ken Saro-Wiwa's grave rose the plant of militancy that has since convulsed the delta. Where Saro-Wiwa had used moral suasion and intellectual arguments to press his case, his "children" now abduct oil workers, shoot at soldiers, issue ultimatums that give the fever to global oil markets, and sabotage oil installations. In essence, they borrowed the violent vocabulary and bullying tactics of the Nigerian state.

Gambari apart, the much-hyped summit of the Niger Delta strikes me as some jiggery pokery, a gambit. As a number of intellectuals and activists have argued, there's really no point to another elaborate talking jamboree. Since the 1960s, a number of commissions have examined the peculiar challenges of development in the delta. There is a litany of development plans, products of earlier summits by "stakeholders," tucked away in government offices, discarded.

Yar'Adua thinks it's time to talk, but he should listen to the marginalized people of the delta who insist it's time to act. If he is serious about redressing the injustice done to the people of the Niger Delta, he ought to exhume any of several development blueprints archived by past governments — any — and proceed to implement it.

Perhaps the reason he so desperately clings to the option of a summit is that, far from wanting to do justice, he wishes

to buy time. It's altogether possible that he craves more time to enable the culture of parasitism to thrive and fester. At any rate, his advocacy of a summit is often undermined by his regime's saber rattling. One day, he presents himself as an agent of peace; the next, he ratchets up his bellicose stance, like a man about to wage war against his own.

A clear danger is that Yar'Adua may be wedded to the moribund perception that the Nigerian state has the wherewithal to compel the aggrieved people of the delta to bend to its will. His regime's slowness to retreat from Gambari bespeaks a certain arrogance and insensitivity. His is the posture of a man who envisions himself as a doer of favors to the people, and who expects then that his decrees are to be obeyed just because he says so.

One has said it before, but it bears restating: the absence of justice in all its ramifications is at the root of the deepening crisis in the Niger Delta nay Nigeria. There is neither reason nor rhyme to the depressed condition of the Niger Delta. Considering how much revenue Nigeria has earned from crude oil, it is inexcusable for Nigeria to remain blighted, a portrait of failure. It is nothing short of a crime that the delta, site of the greatest exploitation of crude oil, should be mired in crushing poverty. That's an anomaly that deserves meaningful correction, not the usual dose of palliatives.

The gravity of the situation in the oil-producing hub mirrors the dysfunction in the larger Nigerian polity. Some critics are quick to flay such nationalist groups as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Movement for the Emancipation

of the Niger Delta (MEND). But these critics are often blind to the fact that the rising stridency of secessionist rhetoric is directly related to the real and easily perceived absence of equity and justice in the Nigerian space. Does anybody believe that separatist groups would have sprouted if Nigerian leaders were making a good faith effort to fulfill the legitimate aspirations of citizens? A state that routinely aborts justice stands the risk of provoking the fury of its disenfranchised populace.

Here, finally, is what one finds awfully sad about Yar'Adua's slumberous response to what is an exploding situation in the Niger Delta and elsewhere in Nigeria. He has spoken about the need for "peace, security and long overdue progress in the Niger Delta," but he has never felt tempted to utter the word justice. Can a man do justice when he cannot see its absence?

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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*.

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