

# 27 Betrayed Soldiers

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*By Okey Ndibe*

On April 27, the Nigerian state committed a grievous act of betrayal of 27 brave soldiers who simply stood up to demand their right.

That day, a military tribunal condemned the soldiers – among them, three women – to spend the rest of their lives in jail. It is nothing short of a scandalous miscarriage of justice that the court found the soldiers guilty of mutiny.

The scandal lies in the details of the case. The soldiers' so-called crime was to protest the non-payment of allowances that accrued to them from their participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Liberia. Each of the protesting soldiers had earned as much as \$25,000. Yet, long after the UN had remitted the funds, some corrupt military officers sat on the funds.

After months of seeking payment, the exasperated soldiers staged a mild protest in Akure, Ondo State. No doubt, they sought to draw attention to their plight – and to shame the military authorities into releasing their overdue entitlements.

Instead of doing the right thing by these long-suffering soldiers, the military brass ordered their arrest and prosecution. Their lawyer, Femi Falana, has said that they were detained for several months under abominable conditions. And then the tribunal compounded this bizarre

injustice by herding these innocents off to life imprisonment.

This is one more instance – and a particularly unforgivable one – of a highly criminalized state presuming to be the custodian of law and order.

Let's be clear: mutiny is a grave matter, with a potential for undermining the security of a state. But the convicted soldiers, properly understood, are not mutineers so much as they are victims of a state that rewards real criminals.

Nobody has denied that some corrupt officers illicitly withheld the soldiers' stipends. In fact, in January the same tribunal had convicted five officers of stealing \$68,000 belonging to the hapless soldiers. And what kind of punishment did the quick-fingered officers receive? Mere demotion. Not one of them lost his job. Not one was slammed with a life sentence.

Yet, the twenty-seven soldiers they disinherited and drove to the edge of desperation are found fit to languish in jail unto death. Falana has described the life sentences as "a charade that cannot stand." Charade is too mild a word.

Nigerian students, labor groups, academics and other professional organizations ought to rise and protest the cruelty to these poor soldiers who've been betrayed by their officers, and are in

danger of being made living corpses for asking to be paid what they had more than earned.

Nigerian soldiers, like most of the country's workforce, are poorly paid. In contrast, many military officers earn handsome packages. Besides, many officers enjoy one form or other of patronage from politicians. There's neither rhyme nor reason, then, for an officer to steal a soldier's allowance.

Yet, for years Nigerian soldiers drafted to peacekeeping tasks whispered woeful stories of officers who took huge slices of their payments, or even engaged in wholesale embezzlement.

Despite the appellation of "peacekeeping," it's no secret that these operations are highly hazardous. Soldiers whose job is to keep the peace are often shot at. Sometimes, they are sitting ducks, targeted by the armed groups they try to keep from armed engagement. Many Nigerian soldiers have lost their lives in such peacekeeping assignments as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Congo. Many more have been maimed, condemned to carry for life scars that are grotesque reminders of the sacrifices they made to hold hell at bay for besieged civilian populations in such addresses as Bosnia, Rwanda and Liberia.

The least a nation owes these men and women who risk life and limbs is to ensure that they are paid their due at the completion of their assignments. In the lawless space that's Nigeria, where greed is boundless, this simple expectation is often too much to ask.

What are soldiers to do when a few of their rogue officers decide to pocket their

peacekeeping allowances? Crawl into their barrack cocoons and become mute victims? Fall to their knees, raise hands to heaven, and leave the case in God's hands? Should they pen petitions to politicians in Abuja who all too often are too busy chasing after lucre to pause and listen to anybody's entreaties?

This is a portrait of the predicament these soldiers had to deal with. They were aware of past instances when grubby officers made away with soldiers' peacekeeping allowances. They knew that Nigeria is a space where crime pays, provided the criminal has the preferment of rank or access to the powers-that-be.

They made a decision - absolutely sensible in the circumstances - to dramatize their woes. They deserve apologies from the officers who stole from them. Should these men and women be made to spend even a day in jail, the Nigerian state would have made another investment in its demise.

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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet and political activist. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." He 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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