

The day “NEPA” visited America

Monday, 29 June 2009

By Okey Ndibe

Last Friday, a tornado touched down in a town near my neighborhood. My family and I were visiting some friends whose daughter graduated that day from high school. Suddenly, the sun sulked and tucked itself behind a huge fold of clouds. Everything turned grey. Then lightning streaked the sky, thunder roared and rumbled, and the sky unleashed a storm of hail and rainfall. The storm was accompanied by wind gusts that were later estimated at between 85 and 100 miles.

I had never seen a torrent close to this one in sheer awesomeness or the howling rage of the wind. While I watched, in awe, from the safety of our hosts' living room, my kids and theirs dashed outside to harvest icy hailstones the size of ping-pong balls.

The storm was short-lived; in thirty or so minutes its fury was spent. The rain fell in calm pellets for some time - and then ceased altogether.

Yet, even in her silence, nature was not done with us. Very soon, my wife's cell phone rang. On the line was a friend from our street who told us that a huge branch from a tree on our property had snapped and tumbled to the ground, cutting off a side street. Had the tree fallen towards our house, it would have been disastrous for us. The friend then informed us that

every house in our area as well as a nearby mall had lost electric power.

We hastened home to behold a scene that could have been from a civil war. We were lucky that the wind had blown the tree away from our house. An elderly Asian couple was not as lucky. The wind had snapped a tree branch in half - and the bulky limb used their house to break its fall. Another neighbor had a huge tree uprooted clean from the soil. The tree leaned on their house like a besotted monster.

For more than forty-eight hours, our lives eerily echoed that of millions of Nigerians. My family and I (as well as others in our neighborhood) lived as most Nigerians live - without access to the conveniences that are tied to power supply. Our stove being electric, we couldn't cook. We ate more meals at restaurants than we are used. The milk in the fridge curdled up and acquired a faint stink. Refrigerated vegetables wilted. Luckily, the fear that the food in our freezer, cooked and uncooked, might go bad never materialized. We lugged our dirty laundry to a Laundromat. At night, we made do with flashlights and candles.

For me, the greatest difficulty was having no access to e-mails or to television. For a news buff who likes to keep abreast of events in Nigeria and around the globe, I was tormented by the blackout. I took to

calling friends in the U.S. and Nigeria to find out what was happening.

I could neither watch the (I was told exciting) South Africa-Spain football match nor the dramatic final in which the U.S. sparred with Brazil. A friend rang me as soon as the U.S. scored one against Brazil. On finding out I was not watching the game, he did his amateurish best to give me a blow-by-blow account. He was still at it when, to my amazement, the U.S. flipped a second goal past the Brazilian goalkeeper. I assumed the U.S. team was going to do to Brazil what it did to Spain. Imagine my shock, then, when another Nigerian friend called me two hours later and said Brazil had triumphed.

Since I'd come to count on regular power, its loss left me with a sense of being adrift. It was, in short, as if I had slipped into a dream and been transported to Nigeria. Had the outage happened when schools were still in session, I would have been harder hit. How could I prepare my lectures and seminars? I thought about our children; they would have been lost about how to deal with the daily grind of homework.

My kids, wizened by their Nigerian experiences, joked that NEPA had come to America. I told them that this, indeed, was a taste of life from our beloved Nigeria.

There was a lesson in all of this. Our lives were disrupted by an act of nature. In Nigeria, crises are all-too often man-made. Yes, it was frustrating to go for so long as if trapped in NEPA-land, unable to do the things one takes for granted on account of dependable power supply. But the mini-crisis also showcased what it

means to live in an efficient, ordered society.

A cleaning crew arrived at 12:40 a.m. the night of the storm. Within twenty minutes, they had cut up and removed the felled branch that blocked a side street. Throughout the blackout, we could call the power company's phone lines and get repair updates - and their estimates for the return of electricity to our area. Ultimately, power returned ahead of their estimate. Nigerians could use a dose of that competence.

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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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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