



Thousands of refugees expelled from Nigeria wait for the border to Ghana to open

THE NIGERIAN EXODUS

Alhaji Ali Baba, Nigeria's Minister of Internal Affairs, casually announced on January 17 that all illegal 'aliens' must leave the country by January 31. Within the space of a week, over a million people were uprooted from their homes and flung into the hands of governments ill prepared to receive them. By mid-February, President Shehu was saying that his country had never deported anyone but had merely 'invited' foreign nationals to regularise their status' or leave. But the political damage was already done, and Nigeria's tenuous claims to leadership in African affairs had been called into question.

International media coverage presented the story both as an exodus from a once-promised land, and as yet another example of Africans mistreating fellow Africans. Nigeria was uniformly painted as the villain: a giant among African states, profligate spender of oil wealth turning now in harder times against economic refugees from less fortunate countries.

The Nigeria government and media counter-attacked, but from a position of weakness. It made valid points about the opportunism and colonial mentality perme-

ating much of the international criticism. Other observers noted the relish with which British and other reactionaries 'put the boot in', and just happened to end up obliquely justifying apartheid. But, for all these instances of hypocrisy and imperial nostalgia, a general theme of 'refugees' made destitute by an act of administrative brutality attracted wide criticism. And although chauvinism and momentary anti-imperialism made comfortable defences against international critics, the real issue lay not between Nigeria and the West, but between the Nigerian ruling class, Nigerian workers and other African peoples.

The official justification began with the fact that Nigeria was only applying its own immigration laws as well as that protocol of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which allowed nationals of member countries 90 days' stay without a visa in another member country. Most of the 'aliens', it was argued, had come in as a result of this protocol permitting free movement of goods and persons, and had overstayed. 'Aliens' were also blamed for the extremist Muslim riots which took place in a number of northern cities in 1980 and 1982. Hence the delivery of an ultimatum of two

weeks for well over one million people to clear out.

None of the affected governments (principally Ghana, Benin, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Togo, Upper Volta) challenged Nigeria's sovereign rights. But, with increasing severity, they rebuked it for the total absence of prior consultation which would have alleviated human suffering, and for damaging solidarity at regional and continental levels. Their response was otherwise low-key. One incidental reason for this was that the use of xenophobia as a diversion has occurred in most West African states since the late 1960s (with the common feature of being almost always focused on other Africans rather than Europeans or Levantines). This, of course, did not prevent a fair amount of sanctimony from some West African heads of state, who took exception to the scale of the Nigerian measure.

The question of scale was an important feature. Nobody knows what Nigeria's indigenous population is — somewhere between 70 and 100 million — and therefore the rough immigrant population. By the suddenness of the expulsion, over one million people were despatched into the hands of unexpecting governments. It may well be

true that in the absence of reliable figures, the Nigerian government totally miscalculated the numbers of people affected, as well as the unfavourable publicity this 'refugee' story would attract.

In any case, their counter-attack only worsened their insensitive posture. The argument that their indulgent observance of the ECOWAS protocol had prompted the influx of foreigners was incorrect. That influx predated the 1980 ratification of this protocol, and was in fact the result of the oil boom after 1973-74 and deliberate recruitment by both the public and private sector. The argument that 'aliens' had been primarily responsible for the religious riots of 1980 and 1982 had also been disproved by a commission of inquiry into the 1980 riots. Another reason advanced, that the large immigrant population was draining money out of Nigeria in illegal remittances home, was also invalidated by the simple fact that Nigerians were themselves responsible for the major currency smuggling, particularly towards Britain (several Nigerians are prominent in London's property market).

But this was not the only (mis)calculation. It is no secret that the National Party of Nigeria, led by President Shagari, had good relations with the People's National Party of Ghana which was overthrown by the popular intervention of Flight-Lt J J Rawlings in December 1981. When Rawlings first took power in 1979 following a lower ranks mutiny, Nigeria cut off oil supplies to Ghana with crippling effect. After the 1981 intervention and his return to power, Nigeria demanded immediate settlement of almost \$30m in oil bills accumulated by the Limann government. Fear of a Nigerian version of the populist Rawlings campaign against political corruption had been rife in 1979, as well as since 1981 when many former Ghanaian government and security officials found refuge in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the Rawlings government closed Ghana's three land borders in late September last year to prevent smuggling (mainly of cocoa to Ivory Coast and Togo) and the constant possibility of a mercenary invasion. The major effect of the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria was to force open the border with Togo; an attendant effect was the creation of an opening for interested parties to infiltrate saboteurs among the approximately one million Ghanaians returning home. These effects could not have been lost on elements within Nigeria's ruling party hostile to the progressive politics in Ghana. Objectively, the blanket expulsion order had the potential seriously to destabilise Ghana. However, Ghana earned praise for the efficiency with which it organised the

repatriation of its nationals, and through the evidence of its immediate aid requirements was possibly able to improve relations with previously intransigent bilateral partners in the West.

The analysis of the expulsion common to the international media was that the downturn in Nigeria's economic fortunes due to the oil glut and falling prices had prompted the use of foreigners as convenient scapegoats in order that the ruling party might gain cheap popularity with national elections just a few months away. The one argument the government did not marshal in its defence was this economic/political one, for obvious reasons. This was left to the servile and/or chauvinist press which felt Nigeria was thus relieved of an unwelcome burden, and both crime and unemployment would decrease.

There is no doubt that the Nigerian economy, dependent on oil exports for 90% of foreign revenue, is in crisis. Inflation and unemployment have become chronic but in conspicuous and troubled co-existence with unusually flamboyant wealth borne of systematic corruption in the public and private sectors. The corollary of this oil-export led growth was a staggering level of imports, with Britain alone providing more than £1,000m worth of goods for the Nigerian market. Oil production is now roughly one-half of past peaks at around 800,000 barrels a day. Total reserves are fluctuating around 1,000m naira, slightly more than one month's imports. The government is trying to bring down this monthly import bill to 600m naira. However, Nigeria's backlog of import debts is estimated at 3,555m naira. (or £3,300m) and the government is hard-pressed to achieve success in implementing measures to restrict imports.

That is the situation over which Shagari's NPN presides. With elections only months away, the expulsion order inevitably appears as a crude vote-catcher. Given the muted response from the other major parties, apart from Nnamdi Azikiwe's Nigeria People's Party, it is also a measure Nigeria's workers will have taken note of. (The state of structural unemployment will not have been improved by the expulsions, and the Labour Minister has announced recently that strikes are illegal and offending unions would be proscribed.)

There is, therefore, a measure of consensus among Nigeria's dominant petty bourgeoisie on the political strategy appropriate to the times. But the cost is high. The contempt with which Nigeria has treated its ECOWAS neighbours has destroyed its already tenuous claims to leadership in African affairs, and the difficulties forging a broad front in progressive African politics

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have been aggravated by an apparently casual yet enormous blunder.

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