

COMMENTARY

Nigeria facing human rights crisis, sanctions needed

By Bernice Powell Jackson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When President Clinton visited Africa a few weeks ago in the first U.S. Presidential visit to that continent in some two decades, he did not visit Africa's most populous country, Nigeria. That is because Nigeria is a human rights debacle. And the news from Nigeria only gets worse.

Headed by a military junta under the leadership of Gen. Sani Abacha, Nigeria continues to jail the democratically-elected President Chief Moshood Abiola, who was never allowed to take office. Hundreds,

perhaps thousands of others are also in prison, including a former head of state and other former high government officials.

Indeed, Nigerian human rights activists and those who criticize the government are routinely questioned, harassed and imprisoned. In 1995 internationally-known human rights activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others were executed on trumped up charges. Last December Shehu Musa Yaradua, a former general and Vice President, died while in jail of unknown causes.

Now Nigeria's former

Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson



number two government official, General Oladipo Diya, and five others have been found guilty of plotting a coup last December and have been sentenced to death. Four others were sentenced to life in prison and six were convicted of lesser crimes.

Church and human rights groups have once again called upon General Abacha to grant clemency to those sentenced to die.

The government of South Africa has strongly warned Nigeria of an "adverse reaction" should the alleged coup plotters be executed and the British Commonwealth, the United States and Great Britain all expressed unhappiness with the rulings.

Amnesty International called the trial "grossly unfair" and in contravention of Nigeria's own Constitution and its international commitment.

General Abacha seized power after annulling the 1993 elections and has been promising new elections ever since. It now looks like an

election will be held this summer, but in the past several weeks, to no one's surprise, he has emerged as the only candidate of all the government-approved parties.

Meanwhile, protests are continuing inside of Nigeria. Millions of Nigerians boycotted the recent national assembly elections. A rally in Ibadan, a large city in the southwest of the country, ended in a riot and with police firing into a crowd. Two opposition politicians were arrested, as well as several dozen others.

While the human rights violations, the murders and imprisonment of political opponents, the denial of a free press and of free, open democratic elections all exist in Nigeria, just as they did in apartheid South Africa, the world has not yet placed sufficient economic pressures on the government of Nigeria for it to understand that it must change.

Indeed, the U.S. government has been hesitant to call for oil sanctions.

Such sanctions would end the dollars which fuel what is

perhaps Africa's most oppressive government.

Nigeria is one of the world's largest oil producers, yet its people are starving and unable to get gasoline themselves. The government cannot explain where the oil revenues have gone.

Those Nigerians whose communities have been given over to oil production have been at the forefront of the protests.

The U.S. government can no longer waffle in its opposition to the tyranny of Nigeria.

We must support oil sanctions against that country and must press that illegal government which laughs in our face while it kills and imprisons its own people.

U.S. oil companies doing business in Nigeria can no longer pretend not to see what is going on all around them.

It is clear the Abacha government has no intention of giving over its power.

Let's tell the world the Emperor is wearing no clothes.

Let's begin an oil boycott sooner rather than later.

Mr. President, do you really want to go there?

By Harry C. Alford

President/CEO,

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Special to Sentinel-Voice

Our President, William J. Clinton, has decided to organize a national dialogue on race. Is this a wise thing to do at this time?

This nation made its biggest gains through racism and has yet to ever apologize or even acknowledge its vicious legacy. The nouveau idea appears to softly speak and babble like Rodney King's "Can't we all just get along?" The answer to that question Mr. President is this: HELL NO!

It will be extremely hard for me to get with someone who perpetuates pain on me and my loved ones. Someone who does not acknowledge the wrongs done and being done and who wants to exclaim "discrimination no longer exists!" cannot expect to sit down and chat.

Before we can sit down and talk, there must be some significant recognition, reparation and rules of future engagement that will be mutually agreed to.

I have personally studied the lives of my parents, grandparents and great grandparents. I have witnessed their denial of education, ownership and economic equity.

I have awakened to a ten foot cross burning in our front yard because we chose to buy a home in a particular neighborhood. That incident occurred when I was 8 years old and it will never be forgotten. I've had to urinate in the woods because I was not allowed to use public restrooms. I've had to go thirsty because I couldn't drink from clean drinking fountains. I went hungry because I couldn't eat in any existing restaurants.

My crime? I am black!

Is today much better?

I don't think so, not when it comes to money and the equal right to earn it. My wife wanted a home in a certain neighborhood here in Washington, D.C. We made our offer, produced the money but were eventually denied. Why? Because Black folks aren't supposed to live in this neighborhood which is home to dignitaries like former vice president Walter Mondale.

Opening up deep wounds is not the way to solve racism. The first thing you need to do Mr. President is to clean up your own shop. Racism is dripping from the very agencies you are in control of.

The FBI is filled with racists. The Department of Agriculture blatantly discriminates against Black farmers. The Department of Transportation has virtually corrupted the highway affirmative action program, thus eliminating Black contractors from doing any business on our freeway systems. Blacks get less than 2 percent of all small business loans.

Black business is at an all-time low with federal agencies. Black employment has gone into reverse and downward. Why don't you "dialogue" that?

If you wanted a "real deal" discussion, why didn't you recruit the Honorable Andrew Young? Where is Dr. Arthur A. Fletcher, the author of affirmative action? Shouldn't he have a word in this matter?

If you want to do something constructive, then order your cabinet to stop overseeing the wanton racism and discrimination that occurs daily on the federal level. The "good old boys round up" mentality still exists and you aren't addressing it.

Clean up your employees and business practices and then, maybe then, we can sit down and rap awhile.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Ray's death leaves questions only FBI can actually answer

Special to Sentinel-Voice

James Earl Ray, the man convicted of assassinating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 30 years ago, has died. With his death go a lot of unanswered questions and, many people believe, the truth about who organized the assassination of the revered civil rights leader.



CARL ROWAN

I believe Ray's early confession that he shot Dr. King, not his 29 years of denial that he was involved. But I am as sure as I breathe that he was just a stupid, bigoted triggerman who had no idea who was paying him to commit murder.

During the 30 years since King's death I have been bedeviled by the question, "Who most wanted King dead?" And the answer keeps coming back, "J. Edgar Hoover and some of his sycophants in the FBI."

In 1975, three years after Hoover's death, then FBI Director Clarence Kelley responded to my publicly expressed suspicions and criticisms by allowing me to read thousands of FBI documents about King that had never been made public. I found enough to cause me to write this in my book "Breaking Barriers":

"Neither ... the passage of time, nor anything else will ever end the suspicion, the speculation, about who really killed Dr. King. I shall go to my grave believing that Hoover, William Sullivan and others in the FBI had a role in silencing the black man they professed to fear, but surely hated."

I found in those FBI documents stark proof that Hoover personally ordered 25 separate

campaigns to "neutralize" King — that is, destroy him as an effective leader.

In the early stages it was Hoover going before Congress, then to editors and publishers, to call King a "sex pervert" and to brand him "the most dangerous Negro ... from the standpoint of communism" and

"the nation's greatest liar." Hoover played tapes that suggested King was both a womanizer and a homosexual.

When that did not work, Hoover wrote memos ordering FBI agents to engage in tactics such as planting women in King's office, forging his name on fake stationery to make him look like a tax cheat, trying to break up his marriage and, finally, trying to provoke him to commit suicide.

Dr. King's widow and his children still are demanding a formal federal investigation. They should, given that some strange manipulations of Ray's lawyers and of judges always prevented a public trial of Ray. He confessed only after his first lawyer was fired and a new lawyer, Percy Foreman, told him that if he didn't accept 99 years in prison he would die in the electric chair.

An incredible lot of fishy stuff always prevented a courtroom airing of Ray's involvement, and who financed him and how he escaped to Europe.

So the suspicions will fester. And I will still go to my grave believing that a sinister hand of the FBI was involved in that dastardly killing in Memphis.

Wages

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We further recommend that Congress index the minimum wage to inflation starting in the year 2001 to prevent a further erosion of its value.

Low-wage workers should be treated no differently than other, higher-income workers who annually receive at least cost-of-living increases in their salaries.

With our economy in such glowing health,

there could be no better time to raise the minimum wage.

As President Clinton urged in his State of the Union Address: "In an economy that honors opportunity, all Americans must be able to reap the rewards of prosperity. Because these times are good, we can afford to take one simple, sensible step to help millions of workers struggling to provide for their families: We should raise the minimum wage."