

**Newsletter from Geoffrey Care, IARLJ's 1st Past President
From Okrika, Rivers State, Nigeria
March 2010.**

Dear Colleagues,

Last year I wrote a letter from Nigeria which was of a somewhat general sort. I now want to tell you something about what I have seen and heard concerning issues which concern us professionally – refugees and, arguably, internally displaced persons.

Just to start off I went to Nigeria in November last year and spent the first month in Kaduna, up North. I did so because I was advised it was still particularly unsafe to travel to Port Harcourt in the Delta Region. I stayed there until just before Christmas when I announced risk or no, advise from the UK High Commission or no I was going to join my wife in Port Harcourt!

I spent the next three months shuttling between Okrika (just opposite the NNPC (the Oil Refinery in the Creeks) and Port Harcourt city. I am sure everyone knew I was there but I was confined to quarters by the family as an extra precaution – though for what that was worth I cannot imagine at least in the village where everyone knows what happens – often before it does!

My existence was unthreatened – but it was very hot, very humid and difficult to escape when there is rarely electricity and using the generator is expensive.

To turn to our business.

Before Nigeria became independent part of its territory included the mandated western part of what is now Cameroon. There was also the French region. In brief the boundaries were redrawn and the two mandated territories were put together to form what is now known as the independent Republic of Cameroon. There was however a boundary dispute in the making which landed up in the International Court at The Hague. Nigeria, then independent, submitted the dispute to the court rather than run the risk of hostilities – and on 2006, lost.

There were however conditions imposed by the Court, basically to protect the fundamental rights of the inhabitants of the disputed area Bakassi. Perhaps if Cameroon had respected their part of the judgment the matter might have lain where it fell even though Nigeria does, so the Navy contends, a difficulty of navigation in the waters between the Bakassi Peninsular in Cameroon and Nigeria. But, so the inhabitants of the region assert, their fundamental rights of religion at least have been trampled upon and in other respects they have been persecuted and some 200,000 have left or been chased out of Cameroon over the last 20 years.¹

Some have managed to integrate into Nigerian society but others have been unable to do so and have landed up in a camps. They complain of the conditions and have been stirring up support for their cause. Support has come from the press and

¹ See Nigerian newspaper reports eg THIS DAY March 22 2010 pages 10 and 71

from the Nigerian Naval Commander who says the waters are too shallow for his vessels to navigate in and this affects the security of the nation.

One of the difficulties, which is common in many parts of the world and certainly in Africa is that however long someone has lived in a part of his country or if he is a member of a particular ethnic group but has been living elsewhere he may not be accepted in the community – totally. In particular he will be unable to lay claim to land and if he has no land and there is no job – which is usually the case failing any sort of welfare he will starve or be on the streets.

In my mother in law's own search for teachers for her school we interviewed a man who somewhat diffidently acknowledged a Cameroon background. He was reluctant to answer questions but was obviously fairly desperate for a job. Whether he was a Bakassian or not who knows?

The other – more purely recognisable refugee issues are those fleeing the conditions in Chad They are spirited across very porous borders in the North parts of Nigeria – for a hefty fee and brought mainly to Lagos it seems . The journey from Chad to Lagos is long and without someone to conduct them or knowledge of the country it would be difficult for them to make it unaided. They will land up in ghettos of Nigerian northerners (who look the same and speak a common Hausa language) and can better be lost in the crowd. There the traffickers will put them to work and of course keep most of their wages. If they try to "go it alone" they are shopped to the authorities and no doubt are sent back to Chad.

There is no appeals system available for the refugee claimant and even if there was it would be unlikely that these refugees would be in a position to access it.

An example of a thriving trafficking racket.

I have seen no reports in data which comes our way either on relation to the camp or the existence of these refugees

Recently you may have read of the carnage in Jos².

This is an example of the Hausa (Northern) Fulani who have lived in the region for generations not being accepted by the "owners of the land" or sons of the soil the Berom. It is little to do with religion and a lot to do with the use of this element of ethnic animosity by vicious and unscrupulous power seekers.

The Anglican Church is reported as laying the blame on "Muslims". It seems there had been an attack not long before by "Christians" on " Muslims".

The Berom are mainly Christian or at least non Muslim and the Fulani the people originally from the North, are mainly Muslim. Both live in Plateau State of which Jos is the capital.

It is long-standing issue as three Commissions of Inquiry over the last 20 years

² See a Report in The Times March 26 pages 40-41 Jonathan Clayton

or so bear testimony to. Each of these Commissions presided over by eminent Judges (the last being Justice Ajibola (the judge in The Hague who delivered the minority Opinion in the Cameroon dispute and who has later said he was wrong) have all laid the blame for the troubles at the door of particular groups of people and individuals acting in their own power seeking interests.

They have used this "ethnicity" which is so prevalent in Nigeria to further their own ends and the labels of Muslim and Christian attached largely as a means of stirring up trouble and this using it for their own evil ends.

No effort has been made by any Government so far to implement any of the Commissions' recommendations to try to bring a lasting peace to the area.

So one can see that here again the example of second class citizens and the downside to ethnic divisions which leads to fragmentation of a state.

I am sure I may, as an outsider I oversimplify matters, although I have tried to check my conclusions locally; but this is how I observe matters from what is reported in the press and what little I can see for myself.

Geoffrey Care