

KEEPING ALIVE OUR COMMON HUMANITY *

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I would like to start by sympathizing with the victims of the March Eleven Tragedy in Madrid. May their families have the strength to bear their painful loss. May this country have the wisdom, the courage and grace to continue to be a great inspiration and role model in the arts, architecture, business and foreign affairs, not just for Europe, but also for the rest of the world.

I have known the pains and agony of surviving in a climate of fear and uncertainty. For I was jailed for life in 1995 by a Special Military Tribunal set up by General Sani Abacha, who was then the maximum ruler of Nigeria. The tribunal was ordered to sentence all military officers and civilians who were found to have conspired to overthrow his regime. Based on a document sourced from a Special Investigation Panel, which preceded the tribunal, my magazine, *TheNEWS*, published a story which proved the innocence of all the 41 people so far arrested. Abacha had made up his mind to crush any democratic opposition that would prevent him from transforming into a civilian president – he wanted to lengthen his stay in power by at least eight more years. The arrest and trial of people for this phantom coup was to instill fear in his perceived and potential enemies.

It was a very dangerous time to expose and ridicule this tyrant. But that was what we had to do to stop our Nigeria from being reduced to a primitive arena of absolute terror. The military investigators wanted me to disclose the source of our story. I refused. If I had told them the names of the officers who gave us the information they would have been killed. I was then summarily sentenced to life imprisonment. Following an international outcry that followed our case, Abacha reluctantly reduced my prison term to 15 years. If he had not suddenly died on June 8, 1998, he would have kept me in jail till 2010. So coming here to share my experience with you would not have arisen at all. That's why I'm very much delighted to be here.

I was not the only journalist jailed for life: there were Chris Anyanwu, Ben Charles-Obi and George Mbah, who worked for different media houses. And it was not only journalism that was under attack. It was very difficult for many business organizations to survive. Civil rights organizations were repressed. Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti, who was campaigning for our release, was subsequently arrested and jailed for life. As a mark of humiliation, they locked the two of us together in a single cell for a long while. Remember that I was less than two months in jail when Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Ogoni brothers were hanged. Chief M. K. O. Abiola, the publisher of National Concord newspaper and other titles, who won the June 12 presidential elections was sent to prison where he later died. And his wife, Kudirat Abiola, who was campaigning

for his release was gunned down on the street of Lagos. Retired Generals Olusegun Obasanjo and Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, former head of state and his deputy, who were then asking Abacha to democratize the polity, were dragged before the tribunal. While Yar'Adua was condemned to death, Obasanjo was given life imprisonment.

A year before that time, Wole Soyinka, our much respected Nobel Laureate for literature, and a critic of Abacha and his regime, had been hounded out of the country like a terrorist. Ogaga Ifowodo and Akin Adesokan, two of Nigerian award-winning writers, were arrested at the border on their way back to Nigeria after attending a conference in Europe, partly because the security agents found on them photographs they took with Soyinka. The list of the victims of that tyranny is long. Don't let me bore you with a catalogue of detainees and prisoners. I just want to say that of all the media houses in Nigeria, ours suffered the most: two of our senior editors, Bayo Onanuga, and Dapo Olorunyomi had to flee to America. Ladi, the wife of Olorunyomi, was detained in lieu of him. Babafemi Ojudu, our Managing Editor, almost died in detention. Our General Manager, Idowu Obasa, simply went underground. At a point, eleven members of our staff were in detention.

Our Kaduna Correspondent *Bagauda Kaltho*, who was arrested in 1996, is yet to return to the office or to the warm embrace of his wife and two kids. He was killed in detention. Carting away our magazines from the vendors meant a big financial loss which was easy to account for. But it has been very difficult for me and my colleagues to account for the death, in that tragic circumstance, of that young and brilliant journalist. As Abacha filled up the prisons with more people, in spite of all the criticism around the world, it was very difficult to hope for a better day. Many of our people were beginning to give up on the country. Friends and relations who would like to give the prisoners compassion and hope had enough hopelessness to contend with on the outside.

To beat the repressions of the regime, the rest of my colleagues, which included the poet Odia Ofeimun, the then president of the Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA, had to work in different secret locations to produce our publications – *TheNEWS*, *TEMPO* and *PM News*. We defied the ban on us because we believed that the military junta itself was illegal. For that exemplary battle with the evil man, which we eventually won, there is a legacy of the Nigerian media now called *guerrilla journalism*. The fact that we were not caught for a long while was in part because of the tacit support of some of the security agents who admired what we were doing. In a rather smart show of devious creativity, the regime printed fake copies of *TheNEWS*, *TEMPO* and *TELL* in order to counter the truth those magazines were telling to that arrogant power. But our readers were not deceived. It was rumoured that the American Embassy was funding us. There was nothing like that. What we got from America was a valuable moral support. We depended

on the money made only from copy sales: the government had banned all its agencies from advertising in our publications.

As some of us here who had served prison terms under oppressive regimes know so well, a prisoner of conscience is at once comforted and liberated whenever he knows that there are people fighting on his or her behalf. Each time I'm asked: how did you survive prison? I always talk, among other things, about the four big boxes under our staircase at home in Lagos, which contain a mass of letters written to me in Makurdi Prison, mostly by members of PEN and Amnesty International from different parts of the world. There are two other boxes containing books like Pat Barker's ***The Ghost Road***, Salman Rushdie's ***The Moor's Last Sigh***, Toni Morrison's ***Beloved***, Pablo Neruda's ***The Captain's Verses***, Angela Carter's ***Shaking a Leg***, Festus Iyayi's ***Awaiting Court Martial***, George Jackson's ***Soledad Brother*** and Martha Gellhorn's ***The View from the Ground***. In the stinking environment that was Makurdi Prison, where only common criminals, madmen and corrupt warders thrive, my mind would have been mangled if those letters and books did not cushion my anguish. Communing with many of those brilliant authors, I read *extensively* and *vigorously*. My life was, therefore, largely enriched by my contact with a lot of people through their writings.

For example, shortly after I read Martha Gellhorn's gripping essay, "The Invasion of Panama", in the No.32 edition of *Granta* which Rosemary Friedman of the English Pen sent, I smuggled out a note to her asking for everything that the late author had written. Anne Sebba got to hear about my request, and graciously got me an autographed copy of ***The View from the Ground***. Signing the copy, I understand, was one of the last memorable things that the author did just before she died. I still remember vividly one of the sentences I read in that wonderful piece of reportage: it is shaming to be citizens of a state ruled by a squalid crook from the gutter. For me that sentence carried a lot of weight in jail. When some of the PEN Centres honoured us with their memberships and their awards, their kind gesture was not just an expression of solidarity, it was also a very effective way of humanizing the organization itself by identifying with what was right. It is one of those difficult things that an organization like PEN ought to do in order to endure. If you had failed to do that, it was not only the journalist-prisoner that would have been disappointed, the writers of the PEN Charter would have been let down in a big way.

As soon as I was released from jail on July 20, 1998, PEN Centre USA West, through Larry Siems, showed a special interest in the notes which I kept in Makurdi Prison. Together with Villa Aurora, the Foundation for European - American Relations and the Paul Getty Research Institute, the Centre kept me as a Feuchtwanger Fellow in Los Angeles for ten months to write up the notes. I finished my first draft in the warmth of L.A. My visit to London in April 1999 during the fellowship eased me gracefully out of a writer's block. I needed some materials to

be in the right mood to write a certain segment of my book, *Jailed for Life: A Reporter's Prison Notes*, which was published last year by Heinemann Nigeria. They were notes I had smuggled out from one of my early detention camps. Before I left Nigeria we couldn't trace them. But it was Sara Whyatt and her colleagues who saved me: I found to my pleasure and relief some of those innocuous notes in one of their files. For its generosity and kindness, I'm indebted deeply to PEN. You went beyond the call of duty to help our cause.

Let me end with this letter which Anne Sebba of the English PEN wrote to me in jail:

Dear Kunle,

I wanted you to know that we were all thinking of you last week as PEN organized an evening of reading called "In Praise of Freedom", and we read a piece of your writing. Your name was in The Times. This painting is a dream - I hope you still dream of freedom.

Yes, Anne, I dreamt of freedom behind the walls but, like the majority of my compatriots today, I'm still dreaming of that day when our country will be free from a succession of psychopaths and despots who misrule it. There is no way of functioning effectively as a writer with conscience in my country without offending the sensibilities of many of our politicians who love power without responsibility.

Unlike post - Apartheid South Africa which had the luck of being ruled by Nelson Mandela, a man with a big heart, my former co-prisoner, Olusegun Obasanjo, who is now the President of Nigeria, is mean, petty and very crude. He regards his critics as enemies of the state. Obasanjo is simply a former army general who now believes that the entire country is a barracks. The opposition against him is mounting by the day. He is already clamping down on his critics. Three weeks ago, he crushed a demonstration by a conference of political parties protesting the massive rigging of the 2003 general elections and 2004 local government polls. Last Saturday Wole Soyinka was briefly detained for participating in a rally to protest the increasing misrule in Nigeria. It is a warning to other writers that they too could be arrested. Many of us have been asking: is this what we went to jail for? What has all our struggle come to? A mere clearing of the path for another set of murderers and looters? Right now, a cloud of despair hangs over our country. There is so much insecurity everywhere. Assassinations of key political personalities are rife all over Nigeria. Some armed bandits have even attacked a governor's motorcade. An army of jobless youths roam our streets. Many of the country's private businesses are crumbling. And in the Niger Delta the fire rages on without a solution. The recent killing of two Americans brought it home to many across the world as a much serious case than the government makes the world believe. Many of our sacred institutions are wallowing in corruption. We run a country without a proper merit system. To many of our politicians who rigged their ways to power,

democracy is not about public service, it is about building private fiefdoms. No, this is not what we went to jail for.

I do not regret fighting for democracy. I just feel sad about its aftermath that is turning into sawdust in our mouths. A complex pain that I can scarcely express in words. I dream of that day when our rulers will treat their citizens in civilized manners. And I urge this gathering to keep an eye on Nigeria.

Lots of thanks to the organizers of this event for bringing all of us here. I thank you all for listening.

* *Contributed in Barcelona, Spain, on 17 May 2004 to the Value of the Word Dialogue organized by Forum Barcelona 2004 and International PEN.*