

Nigeria slides towards military rule

Trevor Johnson, Ann Talbot
3 December 2001

The Obasanjo regime of Nigeria, which Western governments hailed as a shining example of African democracy when it came to power in 1999, is sliding towards a resumption of military rule.

The army is now in control of six of Nigeria's 36 states. These include Kano, the country's major northern commercial centre, the city of Jos in the state of Plateau, Kaduna in the north, the oil rich delta region of the south and Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa in the central region.

The military intervention is being carried out in the name of restoring peace in the face of inter-tribal clashes between members of the Hausa-Fulani and Tivs. But initial press reports suggested that the military have been involved in the massacre of 200 people in the town of Zaki Biam, which was razed to the ground. More recent reports estimate that the figure was in fact much higher. Villages around Zaki Biam seem to have been targeted too. Benue State Governor George Akume claims that a further 136 civilians were also killed in one of the neighbouring villages.

Akume said that Tivs were being massacred in the neighbouring state of Taraba, describing the situation there as a "museum of horror." He accused the army of attempting to destroy the economy of Benue.

The true extent of the repression in the region is not yet known, as the media are banned from the area, but the army is responsible for daily acts of oppression and intimidation. Nurses, other medical workers and bus drivers have gone on strike because they face rape, assault and extortion from soldiers.

Tens of thousands of villagers have been forced to flee their homes. They have flocked to camps, joining the many Tivs who have been displaced by the ethnic violence. A United Nations report describes camps as "overflowing with people." An estimated 550,000 people are living in squalid conditions, without adequate water supply or toilet facilities, in daytime temperatures of up to 38 degrees centigrade.

The Nigerian Red Cross reports 30,000 people in urgent need of food and other assistance. Diarrhoea, malaria and

other diseases are spreading. Many of these people fled following inter-ethnic clashes between the Tiv and other tribal groups in the region. Numbering six million, the Tivs are the fifth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. The majority of them live in Benue state, but some live in the neighbouring states from where they have been driven out by the Jukun and the Azeri.

Unconfirmed reports suggest that Tiv militias are carrying out massacres of Jukun villagers. Abdulazeez Tonku, a Jukun politician, told the press on November 21, "As I am talking to you, dead bodies still litter the Akwana and Aruo villages after a recent attack by the Tiv people."

He accused retired military officers in Benue of organizing the attacks and of providing the militia with weapons. The most prominent of the Tiv ex-generals is Viktor Malu, who resigned as Army Chief-of-Staff in April. Government soldiers destroyed his house near Zaki Biam during the massacre. Malu was in London at the time.

The gravity of the situation in Nigeria was emphasised by Festus Okoye, Chairman of the Transition Monitoring Group, a coalition of 61 liberal, human rights and other organisations set up to monitor the transition to civilian rule. He warned that the frequent deployment of soldiers to states in crisis was an open invitation to the military to take power from the civilian government: "We are really concerned that as we are democratic, we seem to have the military all around us as if we are still under some form of military rule."

Okoye criticised the politicians who had allowed anti-democratic forces to exploit religious and tribal differences to create a situation of insecurity. Warning of the Balkanisation of Nigeria, he said, "Our people... are being segregated... and communities that have lived together for decades are now attacking each other."

There is now a real danger of civil war. Alhaji Ghali Umar Na'Abba, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, warned that the situation in Benue and neighbouring states could lead to the disintegration of

Nigeria. He pointed out that most of Nigeria's food comes from this area. Zaki Biam, the centre of the army massacre, is an important market for yams and other agricultural produce.

Dr Chuba Okadigbo, Chairman of the Senate Ad-Hoc Committee on Riots, Crises and Conflicts, echoed the Speaker's warning. Nigeria, he said, could experience another civil war if the violence continued.

While most Nigerian commentators have been at pains to distance President Olusegun Obasanjo from the growing conflict, he is in no way separate from this process of militarisation and communal violence. Obasanjo became president after elections in 1999, but had previously been military dictator from 1976-1979. He only came to be regarded as an opposition figure when General Sani Abacha imprisoned him in 1995.

Obasanjo claims that he told the army to use minimum force in Benue, but immediately after the massacre he went on national television to insist that the soldiers had acted in self-defence. The inquiry that he has set up to investigate the massacre has been specifically told not to examine the army's behaviour.

The massacre at Zaki Biam represented an escalation of the divisions within the military and political elite, as these self-serving factions compete with one another for Nigeria's resources. They are whipping up communal divisions as a means of creating the conditions to bring the army back to run political life.

While the Governor of Benue was responsible for calling in the troops, as ethnic conflicts worsened, it was Defence Minister Theophilus Danjuma, a retired general, and himself a Jukun, who ensured that Jukun troops were sent.

In the northern states, former military dictators Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Abdulsalami Abubakar have put their weight behind the campaign for fundamentalist Sharia law. They are channelling funds into Islamic organisations and directing armed gangs against the Yoruba and Igbo minorities.

Igbo leaders in the north have held talks with former Biafran leader, Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu, echoing the events that preceded the previous civil war. It was attacks on minority Igbos in the north that led to the predominantly Igbo southeastern region forming the breakaway state of Biafra in the civil war of 1966-70.

As in the 1960s, Nigeria's internal troubles are intimately connected to the interests of the oil corporations and the Western powers. The growing communal tension in Nigeria follows Obasanjo's

imposition of IMF measures reducing the amount of patronage that the central government can offer to the regional elites, sparking a vicious struggle for control of the country's resources, particularly its oil reserves, with each state demanding a larger share of the oil revenues.

During the Cold War, the West was prepared to allow the corrupt elites that ran many of the newly independent African countries a share in the spoils won from exploiting their countries. With the end of the Cold War, the West now insists that African governments are established that are "accountable" and "transparent" to the major corporations and international financial institutions. They are no longer prepared to see a portion of their potential profits siphoned off by African elites.

Obasanjo's election was a product of this policy. But a new element has emerged since the Bush administration stole the US election at the end of last year. A US government with no democratic credentials at home is unlikely to promote even the appearance of democracy in Africa.

The so-called war against terrorism following September 11 has given the green light to military repression. Under these conditions, the West is less concerned with maintaining the façade of democratic forms. America has had a direct role in events in Nigeria, since military personnel from Fort Bragg are currently training the Nigerian army. Following the visit of Under Secretary of State Thomas P. Pickering to Nigeria and other West African countries last year, the Bush administration decided to spend \$100 million creating a force loyal to US interests that could intervene anywhere in West Africa.

The massacre at Zaki Biam should be seen within the context of increased US involvement in the internal affairs of West Africa. This is a vital region for oil supplies, particularly since new reserves have just been identified offshore, in addition to those already being exploited in the Niger Delta. US involvement is intended as a sharp warning that it must have first call on Nigeria's oil revenues.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact