

Draconian emergency powers imposed in Nigeria state

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Both chambers of Nigeria's National Assembly have fully backed the state of emergency that was imposed in Plateau State by President Olusegun Obasanjo on May 18.

After attacks and counterattacks between Christian and Muslim villagers that left hundreds dead, Obasanjo dissolved the state legislature, sacked the incumbent governor, Joshua Dariye, and replaced him with a retired army general, Major General Chris Alli.

The emergency legislation gives the police and other security services the power to detain people indefinitely, conduct searches without warrants, impose curfews and ban public processions. Obasanjo said the state of emergency would be reviewed in six months' time.

Major General Alli, who previously held power in the state when Nigeria was under military rule, has warned, "In my 32 years in the military, I have been taught to use force and again I am the administrator. So I have all the powers to crush any attack."

This is the first time since 1962 that an elected president has put a state under emergency rule, though Obasanjo has repeatedly relied on the military as more than 10,000 have been killed in ethnic clashes since the return to civilian rule in 1999.

On May 2, raids by a militia from the mainly Christian Tarok ethnic group armed with semi-automatic rifles on the largely Muslim town of Yelwa left at least 600 dead according to reports made by residents to the Red Cross. One local man said that more than 300 people were buried in the mass graves he had helped dig on the second day of the killings.

The attack began on a Sunday night, after all the roads to the town had been blocked. The attackers invaded on foot and in jeeps, shooting men, women and children and burning houses. Yelwa's houses and shops were nearly all burnt down, leaving the town uninhabitable.

For three years in Plateau State, gangs from the Christian majority and the Hausa-speaking Muslim

minority have been engaged in a series of tit-for-tat killings. Often, these attacks were inspired by disputes over farming and grazing land as much as by religious differences.

After the killings in Yelwa, reprisal attacks were carried out by mobs of Muslim youth in the main northern Nigerian city of Kano. Scores of people were killed, and around 20,000 Christians have been forced to leave their homes and become refugees.

The ethnic clashes have not stopped in Plateau with the declaration of the state of emergency. On May 18, attackers raided five mainly Christian villages and killed more than 20, according to John Yusuf, the pastor of the village of Bakin Chiyawa. Those responsible were thought to be Muslim tribesmen from the Hausa and Fulani groups, seeking revenge for the earlier raids.

As a result of the fighting, tens of thousands of refugees have fled to neighbouring states, and many of the villages in Plateau have now become either entirely Christian or entirely Muslim.

Plateau State has been beset by such ethnic clashes in the years since Obasanjo came to power, the worst being the violence that erupted in Jos city in September 2001 and caused more than 1,000 deaths. The following year, Christian Tarok farmers killed the cattle of the nomadic Muslim Fulani herders, and this then led to revenge attacks on a number of Christian villages. In February 2004, Muslim youths attacked a Christian hamlet not far from Yelwa. A few days later, a church in Yelwa was set on fire, killing 49 of the people inside.

Ethnic conflicts, rooted in the history of colonial rule in Nigeria when tribal divisions were encouraged by the British, are now being continually stoked up and exacerbated under the conditions of twenty-first century capitalism in an oppressed, underdeveloped country, with huge disparities of poverty and wealth.

Though a small elite have become millionaires from the

fruits of selling off Nigeria's oil to the West, the vast majority of Nigerians are getting poorer with each passing year. Fully 80 million Nigerians (out of a population of 120 million) are still forced to try surviving on less than a dollar a day. Around 300,000 Nigerians die of malaria every year, and many more suffer serious illness; 2.3 million have already died of AIDS, and another 3.8 million are HIV-positive.

In spite of its increasing oil production, which is already more than 2 million barrels per day, Nigeria has a GDP per capita of just \$370 and a foreign debt of more than \$30 billion. Its unemployment rate stands at around 28 percent.

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The Nigerian elite try to divert every issue confronting the masses into blaming other ethnic groups for their problems. They seek to both strengthen their own grip on power and undermine any united response by working people. As the BBC commented, "The combination of a huge pool of unemployed youth who can easily be recruited as political thugs, and the presence of thousands of millionaire politicians who use them, is a lethal combination."

Obasanjo's increasingly dictatorial response can only be encouraged by the United States and the West. Nigeria's oil production is of increasing strategic importance given the war in the Middle East. Together with the imposition of the state of emergency in Plateau, Obasanjo has imposed a peace agreement in Delta State between the warring militias of the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups.

Fighting in this region, which has forced Western oil companies to cut back as much as a third of their production, has resulted in more than 200 killings over the last year. In late April, an attack on a boat belonging to ChevronTexaco killed seven people, including two American oilmen. ChevronTexaco has been forced to shut down 140,000 barrels of its daily production because of the violence.

A military operation entitled "Operation Restore Hope" in the key oil town of Warri has put pressure on the ethnic group leaders, using arrests and interrogations. More than 2,000 people have been made homeless as troops destroyed three shantytowns, in "cordon and search operations" in which arms were seized. So far, ChevronTexaco has not been persuaded to return.

Obasanjo has also pleased the Western powers with his economic reform policies. After last year's elections, he

appointed as finance minister World Bank-trained Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, backed by a team of World Bank and IMF economists, as well as a new Central Bank governor, Prof. Charles Soludo. Removing all restrictions on the market is said to be attracting new investors, including 30 million Swiss francs from Nestle, \$20 million from Fernandez in the solid minerals sector, and \$2 billion over the next two years from South African investors. The World Bank is so pleased with this development that it has granted more than \$1 billion to Nigeria in favourable loans.

The brazenness of Obasanjo's imposition of emergency rule has shocked pro-democracy activists. Leading human rights lawyer Gani Fawehinmi and Nobel Prize-winning author Wole Soyinka are leading a coalition of civic groups that are calling for Obasanjo's resignation and the creation of a "sovereign national conference." They want a new constitution that will replace the present one left over from the military dictatorship and colonial times. "We will discuss everything from Shari'ah to the rights of the man on the street," explained Fawehinmi. "In essence we want a better country, we want poverty to go and the elected to be accountable."

There is no indication that the human rights campaigners recognise either the necessity of opposing the domination of Western banks and corporations over Nigeria, or the bankruptcy of ethnic-based politics. The call for a "sovereign national conference" is also backed by a group calling itself the "Ethnic Nationalities Forum," which includes the leaders of several ethnic-based organisations. They want the conference to address "the plight of the exploited minorities across the country" and call for "the sharing of power and control of resources"—the same perspective that has motivated ethnic conflict as local elites complain that the federal government has denied them their share of Nigeria's wealth.



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