

Editorial

Dear reader

Nigeria has the clear ambition to become an economic, and probably political, power house. Its final goal is to eventually achieve 'first in Africa' status, and in global terms to be third in the economy ranking behind China and India. The country's economic growth has corresponded to its population growth, but depends heavily on its petrol reserves. In recent decades, it has tried to diversify its economy, so as to broaden its income-generating base. However, Nigeria's apparent success begs the question of the extent to which its ambitions are a welcome idea. It has been difficult for the country to maintain its democracy. Since independence, it has suffered a civil war (Biafra, late 1960s) and several *coups d'états*, and internal unrest and overall socio-economic instability would seem to continue to be part of, and even define, everyday life. Widespread corruption and politicians' incompetence and inability to deal with the latter, make it a state which is difficult to manage.

Recently, Boko Haram, a Nigerian armed group, has exposed the state's weaknesses, and made it clear to the outside world that Nigeria's politicians appear far from capable of running the country and its economy.

The terrible kidnapping of the circa 200 Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram, has provoked disgust and condemnation from people all over the world. The incident happened in April (2014), yet (at the time of publication) little has been done to help these girls or take action against their abductors, except for a Twitter hashtag campaign and the reported arrival of a British spy plane in Nigeria to help the Nigerian Army in the search. The United States sent 'specialists' from the State Department, the F.B.I. and the Pentagon with medical, intelligence counter-terrorism and communications skills, to advise Nigerian officials. US controlled manned and unmanned surveillance flights have been flown over the heavily forested northeastern region of Nigeria where intelligence officials believe the girls are held. America has even sent armed troops – the usual and expected response from a country that still believes in the power of the army to settle disputes – to Chad, where surveillance drones will be operated from a large air base near N'Djamena. France, which has taken a lead in the fight against militant groups in Mali and the Central African Republic, is helping, as are Britain, Canada and even Israel. On the regional front, five West African countries – Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Chad and Benin – have agreed (despite longstanding differences) to share intelligence and strengthen military cooperation.

Despite the current emergency, it would be unrealistic to expect America, or any foreign nation, let alone the United Nations or the Organisation of African States, to intervene or try and come to the rescue every time there is the kind of problem that is currently unfolding in Nigeria, or elsewhere for that matter. Every state has sovereignty and is responsible for the safety of its own citizens.

However, in this, Nigeria's record is abysmal.

As pointed out *supra*, corruption in the country is all-pervasive, and citizens rightly complain that they have not shared in the nation's considerable oil wealth. Regional differences in wealth, and lack of wealth distribution over socio-economically different groups in society, add to the problem and levels of distrust. In many, if not most, parts of the country, the federal government cannot provide security, good roads, water, health, reliable power supplies and/or education. Moreover, unstable food prices limit food security. The problems are especially acute in the mostly Muslim northeast. The army, accused of human rights abuses and itself lacking essential resources (salary, arms, and so on), is a threat to stability, adding to the general feeling of lawlessness and insecurity. One can indeed say that the army is rather part of the problem, rather than the solution.

It is against this background that Boko Haram's militants have spent the last five years wreaking havoc and killing civilians – about 4,000 have reportedly died – mainly in the northeastern section of the country, but also elsewhere in the country, hitting mostly civilian targets. But it took a horrifying mass abduction to touch hearts around the world and persuade Nigeria – whose president, Goodluck Jonathan, initially rejected outside help – to join with other countries to try to find them.

Through their insistent presence, the militants, who easily traverse porous regional borders and whose movements within Nigeria are unhampered by local law enforcement, have displaced close to half a million people and destroyed hundreds of schools in a wave of terror reportedly aimed at establishing an Islamic state in one of Nigeria's poorest regions. A committee of the United Nations Security Council recently put Boko Haram on the sanctions list in an effort to cut off funding – but that gesture might be seen as too little, too late. Indeed, the international community has rarely condemned Boko Haram's activities, nor has it developed any coordinated reaction to deal with this clearly criminal organization. The US has long been absent from the debate, and has refused to consider Boko Haram to be what it is: a criminal group whose members are misusing Islamic religious doctrines to perpetrate violence. Under secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, the US refused to classify Boko Haram as a 'terror group' even after it threatened to kill the US ambassador to Nigeria. According to CNN, and in the words of a major State Department official (15 May, 2014), 'the United States could have acted sooner to designate Boko Haram a foreign terrorist organization', adding that 'resolving this crisis is now one of the highest priorities of the U.S. government'. Again: too little, too late. And the question remains what geopolitical motivation guided the US to remain so uncommitted and neutral, even in the face of the obvious?

As history shows, military response clearly can only be part of the answer to the problem posed by Boko Haram. President Jonathan's government has to attack the root causes of disaffection by reducing corruption; reforming the police and army; and providing jobs, schools and other vital services for all of Nigeria's citizens. Unfortunately, this is 'old news'. Nigeria, and more widely, the whole of Africa – with only a few exceptions – has up until now never been able to effectively deal with corruption or solve its socio-economic problems in a sustainable, lasting way. So, the question remains: how many more Boko Harams will be needed to reverse the situation?

This being said, the present issue of Afrika Focus delves into the way in which the Democratic (what's in a word...) Republic of Congo has been dealing with its 'way to peace', via an article that looks at the issue through a discourse analysis perspective. In another article, the growing pains that often accompany the road to democracy in Africa are illustrated by the case of Togo. A third piece in this issue, a case study from Kenya, examines the gum Arabic value chain. The gum is an adhesive and food additive, often used in sweets and soft drinks, and thus an important commodity bought by big multinational companies. For centuries, it has been a source of income for a number of sub-Saharan African countries. Moreover, wars have been fought over the staple – as recently as last year, May 2013, at least 60 people were killed in ethnic (...) clashes in Sudan's arid Darfur region, over land producing gum Arabic. The deaths were the result of an ongoing dispute between two ethnic groups in South Darfur, over pasture and acacia trees, from which the gum is obtained. The Gemir group accused the Beni-Halba community of trying to take away land it had owned for more than 300 years. This shows that even a neutral (to sweet) subject such as gum Arabic can help to illustrate, and even explain, the root causes of political unrest in a number of countries. And this brings us to the last and fourth article that, even though it deals with poetry, reiterates the same political thematic as highlighted above, as it deals with 'contemporary Nigerian poets [that] have had to contend with the social and political problems besetting Nigeria's landscape by using satire as a suitable medium'. Perhaps the latter is amongst the most viable – and maybe only – coping strategies to allow people to survive Nigeria's (and any 'difficult' country's) distressing environment: if you can't beat them, laugh at them...

Patrick Van Damme
Editor-in-Chief