

## **Nigeria, Cameroun and the unending conflict over Bakassi**

**By**

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FOLLOWING the judgment by the International Court of Justice at The Hague concerning the boundary dispute between Nigeria and Cameroun, there have been calls on the Nigerian government by some Nigerians to go to war over the matter. The responses and reactions of some Nigerians, including some of those who represented our country in the case, at The Hague, do not reflect a thorough understanding of the issues involved in the case. In particular, the political context of the dispute is not fully appreciated by many Nigerians. This intervention is meant to place, in its political context, the Nigeria-Cameroun boundary and territorial dispute, including the conflict over the Bakassi peninsula.

For the war-mongers, it is necessary to begin with a reminder of the state of our nation. Our young men and women are currently in a state of despair and desperation. They are frustrated and very unhappy with the deplorable condition of the economy and the insecurity in the society. They are disappointed at the high degree of irresponsibility and insensitivity displayed by political office-holders at all levels of the political system. To add an international war to the volatile national situation would be to "carry the joke a little too far", to borrow the words of the Nigerian President in another, inappropriate, context.

We should do well to remember, always, that women and children are the most vulnerable victims of wars, not the men who usually ask for it. Youths are the greatest losers in all social conflicts, domestic or international.

In civil and international wars, the bulk of the manpower comes from among the youths. They are recruited and conscripted to fight wars precipitated by the actions or inactions of the older ones. Young men and women are mostly the ones maimed and killed at the war fronts. Those in the war-ravaged areas of the country are denied educational opportunities. They suffer unemployment when they are not at the war fronts because, during wars, the national economy is thrown into crisis. National economic (especially financial) resources are diverted to the prosecution of wars. In times of relative peace, characterized by conflicts, short of wars, the budget for defence and security is much larger than that for the social sector (e.g. education, health), or the real sector (e. g.. agriculture, industry). Even where the theatre of war is fairly remote, the youths still bear the greatest brunt of it.

The youths in Nigeria should therefore show very keen interests in all calls for the involvement of our country in any violent conflicts. They should be involved in discussing the issues in dispute which have the potential of degenerating to violent conflicts and participate actively in resolving them. This is because, with the outbreak of wars, their political rights are likely to be violated: denied of the right of full political participation by the Nigerian constitution, it is on them that the major burden of waging the violent conflicts and resolving them falls. Their economic rights are contravened: right to work; right to livelihood opportunities; right to property. Their social rights, too, are breached: right to education; right to health; right to a stable family life. Even their natural rights are derogated: right to freedom of movement; right to personal liberty and security; and right to life.

It is therefore primarily to the Nigerian young women and children that this paper is directed. The purpose is to sensitize them to the nature and dynamics of the international conflict now under national debate, especially its political context, placed in historical perspective; the principles and norms at issue; and the conflict management strategies and mechanisms that had, earlier been, and could still be employed to resolve the matter without resort to war.

We shall proceed as follows. First, we shall discuss the nature and complexity of the boundary and territorial disputes between Nigeria and Cameroun. Then, we shall explore the dynamics of the conflict, placing the conflict in its global and domestic political and economic contexts. Next, we shall specify the principles throwing up by the conflict. Finally, we shall discuss the conflict management mechanisms and strategies that have been employed and that could be used in resolving the conflict.

### **The Nature and Dynamics of International Conflicts: A Conceptual Framework**

International conflicts are contests or clashes between or across nation-states. The struggle might be between one or more governments to monopolize the exploitation of resources in disputed territory. It might occur when one state tries to prevent another from obtaining some resources that are vital to its survival. It could arise when one or more governments intervene in domestic disputes of another state. Occasionally, a conflict may ensue where the nationals of one state are attacked, dehumanized, killed or maimed by the agents of another state. Often conflicts are presented as occurring between governments. Thus, concretely, most international conflicts are either conducted or perceived as inter-governmental contests or struggles. And the bone of contention is usually territory or some other economic resource. It is seldom the welfare of the citizens of one or more of the states concerned.

On deeper reflection it can be seen that, in reality, international conflicts are struggles between or among social groups or more precisely, social classes, clashing across state boundaries. The real actors in international conflicts are social classes which, in their struggles, mobilize and use the various apparatuses of the state — coercive and non-coercive — to achieve their ends. And the contests are, invariably, for the control of some productive forces: objects of labour (land, raw materials); instruments of labour (technology, finance capital); or labour power (trained or specialized human resource). In brief international conflicts occur when contending social classes, operating from distinct national societies or relatively autonomous territorial entities, struggle to establish monopolistic control over some global productive forces. Hiding behind governments, in most international conflicts are usually the monopolistic capitalists operating trans-nationally and with multinational tentacles. And the victims of such conflicts are, usually, the working peoples — peasant farmers, fishermen, petty traders, workers.

Often, when violent conflicts erupt between two contending ruling classes of two distinct national societies or states, they are extensions of violent intra-state conflicts. As Raymond Aaron has argued, one cannot imagine a non-violent diplomacy as long as he has not eliminated violence from intra-state politics. (Hoffman, 1985:17)

There are, therefore, three critical factors that shape the dynamics of most international conflicts. First, there is the nature of the prize that would accrue from the conflict. This refers to the relative utility and size of the productive forces or social product that the victor might gain in the wake of the struggle. Second, there is the nature of the relationship between the social classes which constitute the real actors in the conflict. Once monopolistic capitalists either on one side or on both sides of the state territorial boundaries have high stakes in the outcome of the conflict, the spiral of international conflicts will be almost unending. Third, is the state domestic politics in the nation states which form the bases for the contending parties. This includes, especially, the nature of the regime in office. Authoritarian regimes or dictatorial governments, by their *modus operandi*, provoke the emergence of violent intra-state politics. And, as already indicated, such violence easily becomes translated into coercive international diplomacy, resulting in violent international clashes.

## 2.BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

The conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon, under reference, is a boundary and territorial dispute. One of the territories in dispute is the Bakassi peninsula. We shall focus on this aspect of the conflict because of the public interest which it has generated in Nigeria. Attempts were made in the past to resolve the dispute through bilateral negotiations, and other peaceful conflict management strategies. But, in 1981, and then again, in 1993 and 1994, the dispute nearly degenerated to a war between Nigeria and Cameroon. Since 1994, the matter has been before the International Court at the Hague. A judgment was recently pronounced by the ICJ on the matter and the Nigerian government issued a statement rejecting the verdict of the international court. The issue therefore still remains alive.

### 2.1. The Historical Background.

The dispute over the Bakassi peninsula is the product of a number of contradictions. First, there is a clash between tradition and modernity. The pre-colonial history of the ancient kingdom of Calabar is haunting the post-colonial reality of contemporary Nigeria and Cameroun. Second, there is the tension between cartographical fact and cultural reality: the map is in conflict with the people. Third, there is conflict between the dictates of abstruse international law and the existential imperatives of struggling humanity. Fourth, there is a gap between the demands of *raison d'taire* and the needs and concerns of citizens.

In pre-colonial times, Bakassi was under the ancient kingdom of Calabar which, in 1914, became part of Nigeria, under British rule. The people of the main settlements in the Bakassi peninsula owed allegiance to the Obong of Calabar. It was, therefore, the Obong of Calabar that placed not only the Kingdom of Calabar itself, but also Efiat and Idombi (in the peninsula) under British protectorate via a treaty of September 10, 1884. The Chiefs of Efiat and Idombi were co-signatories to the treaty. However, subsequently, through a series of bilateral treaties and other legal instruments, the British ceded the territory, first to Germany, and then placed it under the mandate of the League of Nations and the trusteeship of the United Nations. Meanwhile, the British protectorates in Nigeria, including the kingdom of Calabar, were merged with its colonies in the area, as one integrated British colony. Later, largely due to the political errors and indifference of Nigerian politicians, the Republic of Cameroun obtained the Bakassi peninsula in the process of a plebiscite conducted by the United Nations in 1959 and 1961. By the same process, Nigeria also obtained some territories which formerly belonged to Cameroun.

In particular, the critical legal instruments that changed the status of the peninsula and its inhabitants were the following: the Agreement between the United Kingdom and Germany signed in London on March 11, 1913; the Anglo-German Protocol signed in Obokun, on April 12, 1913; the Exchange of Letters between the British and German governments on July 6, 1914; the endorsement, in 1961, by both the United Nations General Assembly and the International Court of Justice, of the results of the plebiscites conducted in Northern and Southern Cameroon on February 11 and 12, 1961; and the diplomatic note, accompanied by a map, dispatched to the government of Cameroun by Nigeria, in 1962. accepting the results of the plebiscites.

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