

10 YEARS OCCASIONED BY ETHNO- RELIGIOUS CRISES AND OTHER FORMS OF UPHEAVALS



Plateau State has witnessed turbulent periods in the past 10 years occasioned by ethno-religious crises and other forms of upheavals that have affected the image of the state and its sobriquet, Home of Peace and Tourism. Both the state and federal governments have been making concerted efforts to restore normalcy to the states, especially the northern part comprising Jos North, Jos South, Jos East, Riyom and Barakin-Ladi local government areas.

The crises had claimed many lives and invaluable property destroyed. As part of measures to tame the ugly trend, the previous and the present government set up various commissions of inquiry to probe the incidents. Some of them are the Prince Bola Ajibola Commission, Niki Tobi Commission and Chief Lar Reconciliation Committee, set up to midwife the process of peace in the state.

At the peak of the upheaval two years ago, the Federal Government directed the military to take over security and a military commander became the security chief of the state with the aim of halting the act of bestiality on the Plateau. The operation was later shrouded in controversy as some citizens accused the Special Task Force (STF) of bias in its operations. While the natives then were more at home with the police, the Hausa/Fulani preferred the operation of the military.

The confusion led to various reforms in the operations of the security agencies and subsequent changing of the heads of both the police and military task force

to pave the way for neutrality in the operations and the deployment of more troops. While the security agencies were trying to restore normalcy to Jos and resolve the hostility between the Hausa and the natives, there was an invasion of Fulani herdsmen in the suburbs in a guerrilla-like warfare. All these, at a point in time, kept the security agencies on their toes.

But the doggedness of the task force, the government and religious organisations seems to be yielding positive results, as the crisis is gradually ebbing out based on the various security and peace initiatives put in place. In the past three months, there has been relative peace and calm in Jos. Some of the events that could have provoked the people to raise arms against one another were thwarted and resisted by the people.

Towards the end of 2011, there were multiple bomb explosions at three television viewing centres within the state capital killing three people while others sustained various degrees of injuries. Ordinarily, the incident was capable of igniting another round of violence within the city in the guise of retaliation but this was resisted, based on the interventions of various stakeholders in the state.

Last December, threats of bomb attacks on Christmas Day were issued and circulated in leaflets, particularly targeting churches with the aim of disrupting the Christmas and New Year celebrations. The government, security agencies and religious leaders endeavoured to prevent the threat from coming into reality, through appeals and meetings with various stakeholders in all parts of the state capital.

Also, the Nigeria Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC), at the instance of the Defence Headquarters, organised seminars and peace talks with various stakeholders within the trouble areas in Jos and as well organised table tennis completions and musical concert at Rwang Pam Stadium where youths on both sides of the divide were brought together, harping on the need to embrace peace.

Despite the threat by some elements and the attempts to make 2011 Christmas celebration miserable, the government brought youths from different backgrounds and religious affiliations together by organising a party for them

through the office of the Special Adviser on Peace Building, Mr Timothy Parlong. The youths fraternised with one another and resolved to sheathe their swords.

Apart from this, the Christian community in Jos, during Christmas, paid homage to their Muslim brothers, the Jamatul Nasir Islam at the Jos Central Mosque, where they met minds on how to live in peace with one another. This was the first of its kind in the history of the state and was applauded by the people and as well perceived as a gradual process to a harmonious relationship.

Shedding light on the peace initiatives of the command, the Media/Information Officer of the STF, Captain Charles Ekeocha, who said peace was gradually returning to Jos, added that the command had increased its area patrol and as well has two choppers which maintained constant surveillance of trouble spots.

The media officer said since the rate of hostility in the state, especially in Jos, was gradually dying down, the command had equally embarked on community relations and civil and military relationship to complement their operations. Ekeocha said the command had been holding meetings with stakeholders at various level on the need to embrace peace, adding that the strategy had since been yielding positive results as people now willingly gave out vital information to the STF and had more confidence in the command.

From all indications, the state government is also not resting on its oars towards ensuring lasting peace in the state. It set up a mini security outfit christened Operation Rainbow to complement the operations of the security agencies and also to help in neighbourhoods watch. Apart from being a security outfit, Operation Rainbow also has components that would make it bring people together.

Parlong said the security outfit established by the administration had been doing a wonderful job contrary to the notion of some people that it was established to support a particular ethnic group. "It was the desire of Governor Jonah Jang to end the lingering crisis in the state that prompted him to establish the office of Conflict Management and Peace Building. He also established Inter-religious Council and further expanded it to involve various stakeholders, down to the ward levels as part of the efforts to end the

upheavals in the state. The result of all these is the relative peace we are enjoying presently,” he said

He said the methods adopted by the government in the area of peace building had started yielding dividends, adding that dialogue was presently going on at various quarters on how to instill the spirit of brotherliness on the various ethnic groups within the state.

The Special Adviser pointed out that with the support of the governor, his office was able to bring youths often used as tools during crisis together during the 2011 Christmas celebration, adding that youths on both sides used the opportunity to address the disaffection among them.

According to him, the government is also taking peace advocacy to the flash points within the state capital to sensitise the youth and other people on the need to embrace peace. He added that the relative peace on the Plateau was a result of the advocacy in place, coupled with the efforts of the security agencies. “The new phenomena is bombing, but we have been able to reduce friction and incessant clashes to the barest minimum; Plateau is bouncing back to reckon again as a home of peace and tourism. We will soon get over this, it is not part of our problem,” he said.

The Defence Headquarters, which is in charge of the security, is also making concerted efforts to reconcile various interest groups, apart from the protection of life and property. In addition to the recent stakeholders meeting convened by the NTDC, coupled with musical concert, the Defence Headquarters also organised a health week tagged: Health for the Peaceful People on the Plateau, during which the military provided free medical services and drugs to the people of the affected areas.

During the flag-off of the week at Barakin-Ladi Local Government Area, the natives and the settlers, who had been at each other’s throats, were brought together for the first time in recent times to receive free medical treatment. The people also used the forum to exchange ideas on how to promote harmonious relationship despite their differences.

Speaking at the event, the Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Oluesyi Petirin, said the aim of the health week was to further cement the prevailing relationship among the warring groups and to make them put the past behind them as quickly as possible. Petirin said a body, Alliance Professional Resources Services Limited, was in charge of the health week adding that apart from health professionals from the Defence Headquarters, some staff of the primary health care centres within the communities comprising Jos North, Jos South, Barakin-Ladi and Riyom local government areas were also trained.

He added that all the medical equipment used for the programme would be left behind in the communities as part of the contribution of the Defence Headquarters to uplift the standard of living in those areas.

From all indications, the people are presently cooperating with the government and the various security outfits on ground to end the crisis in the state. Some observers are of the opinion that the government should complement the peace initiatives with justice saying that without this, the reconciliation might not go deep as expected, just as he suggested the formation of a truth and reconciliation commission.