



THE ADVOCACY BULLETIN

The Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group



Interview with Honorable Minister of Information & Culture Lai Mohammed February 27th , 2021

Iyore James: Honorable Minister, there is a lot of information that we in the diaspora read online and on social media posts about the security situation in Nigeria. Can you inform us on what is really happening?

Hon Lai Mohammed: Thank you for the opportunity for the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) through me to exchange views with our fellow Nigerians in diaspora. I cannot agree with you more that the entire information ecosystem has changed completely with social media and that one of the greatest challenges that the social media platform faces is actually how to distinguish fake news from accurate news; fake news from misinformation; disinformation from deliberate attempt to incite hatred and intolerance.

SPECIAL EDITION

Now, with regards to the security situation in Nigeria; our security challenges can be broken down as follows:

- 1.) the Herdsmen-farmer's clash
- 2.) the Boko Haram insurgency which has been raging for the last 10 years
- 3.) banditry and kidnapping especially in the northwest
- 4.) Cultism in the Southwest
- 5.) the militants and IPOB in the southeast and lastly
- 6.) some pockets of oil theft pipeline vandalization in some parts of the South South oil producing areas.

But I think the one that has grabbed global attention is the issue of the insurgency on the one hand, the banditry and kidnapping on the other hand. In particular, the recent ramification of kidnapping, which is targeted at the vulnerable group, largely school children.

It is important to give context to all these issues because clearly no matter how biased anybody can be the Buhari administration inherited all these challenges. We could argue that some of them have taken a bigger dimension, and that is very arguable. You could also argue that some of them have worsened but then again, that is very arguable, but I do not think that is why we are here. We are here basically, to give a context to the situation on ground, and precisely what the government of the day is doing to contain the issues. First, it is especially important to bear in mind that there is a deliberate attempt to ethicize and introduce religion into a matter that is purely a security issue. I will start with the Boko Haram insurgency.

The origin of Boko Haram is very straightforward. Boko Haram was started by a few misguided Muslims who believe that for one to be a good Muslim, not only must one be a teetotaler but, one must wear very long beard. They went about invoking tenets which are neither in the Holy Quran nor in the hadiths but rather, tenants that have been developed by certain extremist fanatical Muslims. Now, these fundamentalists were helped by politicians. I remember in 2003, a particular political party in the northeastern part of Nigeria decided to enlist the support of these fanatical group because they were extremely popular. They preached utopian ideals and had a huge followership. Like some bizarre things in politics, with the help of these insurgents, this politician won the governorship. Lo and behold! He invited a couple of them to serve in his cabinet. But of course, these people came with ulterior motives.

They wanted to change the entire religious outlook. They wanted to turn that state into a theocracy that is, a theocratic state, and that is where they parted ways. The insurgents went back to the trenches; for the 1st time, there was a clash between them and the police around 2009. The military came in and handed over their leader to the police who for reasons best known to them killed him extra-judicially. That was the beginning of our problem! The police thought removing the head would be a simple way of wiping out Boko Haram. Unfortunately, they underestimated the influence of this particular leader. Now, remember global terrorism was rampant at this time (ISIS, Syria, Libya). Before we knew anything, the ragged tied army of Boko Haram linked up with more civilized terrorist groups so that by the time the Buhari administration was sworn into power in 2015, 17 out of 24 local government areas in Borno state was under the effective occupation of Boko Haram. For you to understand what this means, 17 local governments were not controlled by the government of Borno State or the FGN. They are controlled by the insurgents. They had their own sort of mayors, installed emirs, had their own judiciary, and controlled the markets.

Prior to 2015, Boko Haram was so effective that schools and markets were closed in the entire Northeast i.e., Borno, Yobe, Taraba, Gombe, Bauchi and Adamawa states. Nobody could transact any business; banks were closed. Telecommunication system was down. Now you see, for us to appreciate what this administration has achieved, you must know what we met on ground. It was so bad that most of the elites had to move to Abuja. While they were not as effective as in Borno State, Boko Haram was disruptive enough to ensure that there was no or limited access to schools, roads, and hospitals. Prior to 2015, Boko Haram was also active in Kano, Plateau, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Abuja. I mean, they became such a disruptive force that there was hardly a day that passed without explosion of bombs in public places by Boko Haram; even Abuja, the Federal Capital was not immune. The United Nations headquarters was bombed, several lives were lost. The police force headquarters in Abuja was bombed; the nyanya park, one of busiest motor parks in Abuja was bombed twice; supermarkets were bombed in Abuja; This Day newspapers headquarters was bombed in Abuja; that was how unsafe Abuja was. In one day about 280 people were killed in Kano. Places of worship were no longer safe.

This was the situation we met, and this is why I tell my opponents today that since we came into power in 2015 there has not been a single incident of attack by Boko Haram in Abuja. We have pushed Boko Haram out of, Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States to the French areas in Lake Chad. How then did Boko Haram abduct the Chibok girls and Dapchi girls? Do not forget that Chibok girls were abducted in 2014 before we came into government. If anything, this administration succeeded in getting 100 of those girls out many months after they were abducted. With the Dapchi girls, there were about 109 of them kidnapped but within a week or two, we got at least 108 released and people ask me, what about Leah Sharibu? And I say look, do not let us play into the hands of the insurgents. They deliberately withheld Leah Sharibu knowing she is a Christian to cause friction between Muslims and Christians; to give the impression that Boko Haram is about Christians and Muslims. It is not! More or equal Muslim as Christian lives has been lost! Make no mistake about it.

They have no respect for any religion. Now do not let me digress. The insurgents have no respect for any religion. They are extremist, pure and simple!

Yinka Onafuye: Now you said that they operate more like a guerrilla group from the Lake Chad area. So, if that is the case, what is the feasibility of coordinating defense and offence with the Chadian and Niger government to surround them and destroy them once and for all?

Hon Lai Mohammed: You see Yinka, when we talk about terrorism, it is a global phenomenon where these are people with no rules of engagement. They are waging what we call an asymmetrical war. A war in which it is more difficult for a democratic government to engage. These terrorists, they live amongst our people. See if you are fighting a conventional war, you say these are Germans; these are Swedes; these are Americans. Americans. At the battle line, nobody would ask why you killed a particular German soldier. But in an internal insurgency, the Boko Haram are Nigerians; the victims are Nigerians. So, it becomes more difficult to engage.



The first thing Mr. President did when he became Head of State was to seek the support of Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin Republic so as to fortify the Multinational Joint Task Force that is made up of military personnel from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin Republic. There were some EU countries and the United States that served primarily for technical support and intelligence gathering. Whatever progress we made with Boko Haram is largely because of the Multinational Joint Task Force which is head-quartered in Chad. It will surprise you that there have been more casualties in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon but obviously, our main concern is Nigeria. When you think Boko Haram, you must think globally.

Iyore James: Honorable minister, I agree with the notion that some perpetrators of violence may want to create a narrative of war along ethnic and/or religious lines. The Fulani herdsmen farmers clashes are being narrated as such. What is the FGND doing to reassure the Nigerian public and those of us in the diaspora that it is fostering unity in Nigeria and, not allowing these perpetrators in their struggle for power create the narrative of ethnic/religious wars?

Hon Lai Mohammed: I think it is important for us to understand the background to the Herdsmen farmers clashes. It has to do largely with 1.) climate change; 2.) urbanization; and 3.) the proliferation of arms. I will start with climate change. About 50 years ago, the Lake Chad supported irrigation, farming, and animal husbandry for several countries. Several west African countries including Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Central African Republic, and Benin Republic, that is about 20 million people from these countries depended on the Lake Chad for their animal husbandry and agriculture (water source and irrigation). But today the same Lake Chad has lost 90% of its surface water which means those 20 million people that are dependent on the Lake Chad for their livelihood now had to move South for greener pastures and that is the beginning of the Herdsmen-Farmers clashes.

2. The issue of urbanization: a lot of the areas which were grazing reserves and cattle routes have been built upon. Then there is the issue of ECOWAS transhumance protocol.

You see, in Nigeria, our herdsmen are largely Fulani, a minority are Tuaregs but all over West Africa; we have Tuaregs, Fulani and others. Unknown to most people, 23 out of 54 countries in Africa have Fulani herdsmen that typically engage in 2 migration patterns annually. During the dry season, they move from the North to the South looking for grazing area, but it used to be a mutually beneficial relationship. The cattle will come to the South during the dry season; that is at the time of harvest. The cattle eat all the remnants/rubbish from the farm; in the process the cattle dumps manure on the ground thereby fertilizing the land. In those days, if the cattle strays into a farm and destroys the crops, there were internal non-violent mechanisms for resolving the matter. During the rainy season, the herdsmen move back to the North because there is enough grass and water in the North; they also practice farming in the North. The second migration system is more problematic. This is where herdsmen move anywhere there is water and grazing land thereby causing friction when property rights are violated.

Now, you ask what is the FGN doing to stop this? There were over 400 ranches and grazing reserves all over Nigeria that have dwindled overtime due to urbanization. People have built on these cattle ranches and grazing reserves. You see, it is difficult for non- Fulani's to understand this- the cattle know this route over the years. So even when property is built on a particular route, the cattle still go there from memory so that sometimes when you see cattle eating a crop in a particular farmland, it is probably because a few years ago that land was not farmland, it was a cattle route. But it is difficult for the average person to understand. Now the FGN has come with what you call National Livestock Transformation Plan which is an overly ambitious plan to get herdsmen to settle on ranches. These ranches will be provided with water, schools, veterinary stations, and hospitals to encourage nomads to be more sedentary. Zamfara state government has started one of such where they have dedicated 2500 hectares of land for 240 Fulani families to raise their cattle and milk their cows so as to add value to the milk; build schools in an attempt to educate and gradually transform live stocking.

But there is one major problem which is cultural, and this is why we seek the understanding of our brothers. You see, for the Fulani nomad; the one who has 100 cows is more respected than the one with 50 cows. It is irrelevant whether the 50 cows are fatter than the other 100 cows. It is the number of cattle heads that determines how much one is respected in the society. Now we need to convince the average Fulani nomad that if you put your cows on the ranch, it can grow five times faster than the cow that treks from Kano to Lagos. It will produce 10 times the amount of milk. But the Fulani are nomads. Nomads are not just in Nigeria; we used to have them in Sweden and Norway. It was technology and civilization over the years that made it possible to have ranches all over Europe. So, on the one hand, while we are embarking on this livestock transformation plan, we are at the same time embarking on serious advocacy trying to encourage the Fulani to change their cultural patterns. The Fulani nomad does not go to school; most people do not know this, but the average Fulani nomad believes that he owes no allegiance to anybody.

At the age of 5 or 6 years, the Fulani nomad boy has started following his cattle all over the world. Do not forget that with the ECOWAS protocol on transhumance, there is free movement of goods and services including cattle throughout west Africa.

Iyore James: That brings another concern, there are rumors, and we see pictures of nomads carrying deadly weapons and we are wondering: is it legal for these people to be carrying deadly weapons in Nigeria? And if not, what is the FGN doing to stop illegal possession of deadly weapons? But then the other question is: are weaponized nomads from neighboring countries causing the current havoc? What is the Nigerian government doing to protect the Nigerian citizens and protect its borders from weaponized nomads?

Hon Lai Mohammed: You see, this is a very complex issue. Remember, I said one of the causes of this herdsmen-farmers clashes is the proliferation of arms.

You see, we are not living in isolation. Now the entire Sahel from Libya to Mali to Chad to Niger is in a flux, there have been wars. When the Americans dismantled Libya, they unleashed untold violence on the whole of the Sahel because access to weapons became easier. Some of these nomads have such sophisticated guns than our military that was picked from the armories in Libya, Mali, and Chad because all these countries have experienced a civil war in the last 10 years. So, when we talk about the proliferation of arms, this is one of the reasons. Also, when somebody comes from a country within the Sahel, the FGN does not know how he got his weapons. He claims to possess a deadly weapon to protect his cattle from rustlers. Normally, the ECOWAS protocol requires the surrender of arms at border post, but it is not done. So, one of these salutary effects on the border closure was that we were able to restrict smuggling of arms and ammunition.



Iyore James: Right! So, was the closing of the borders because of COVID-19 pandemic, or was it because of the proliferation of arms?

Hon Lai Mohammed: We did not close borders because of COVID-19. We closed our borders when it became clear to us that our neighbors, particularly Republic of Benin, was using Nigeria as a dumping ground. You see, because we want to be food sufficient and secured, we embarked on what is called an Anchor Boors program designed to encourage smallholder farmers to invest in agriculture. The program became so successful that today we have 5,000,000 rice farmers and have expanded integrated rice farming from 16 or 17 to about 40 today. But then we notice that while we banned import of rice to Nigeria; our neighbor, Benin republic allowed rice to be imported which was then smuggled into Nigeria thereby plummeting the price of locally produced rice. After a series of unsuccessful meetings with Benin Republic and Togo, we closed our borders in August 2019. We closed our borders to goods only, not human beings. The border closure worked because agricultural output increased.

Yinka Onafuye: So, my question is, if we can do that quite successfully in the Southwest, could we not do the same thing in the Northwest and Northeast to protect Nigerian citizens?

Hon Lai Mohammed: When we closed the border, we closed the Northwest., Jibia was closed. Seme was closed and I think another area near the South south was closed, not only southwest.

Iyore James: Yeah, but the big issue is with the weaponized nomads that is, migration coming from the North. Most people see the Fulani herdsmen-farmers clashes as an ethnic issue. So, for the administration to foster unity amongst Nigerians and protect the Nigerian Fulani that have been peacefully grazing with the South all these years, should we not also close the northern border until we have a better control on the issue of weaponized nomads just like we did for the rice importation?

Hon Lai Mohammed: You see, when we close borders will close our three borders both in the North and the Southwest, not only Southwest. But let me tell you the challenge we have with your suggestion is that there is an ECOWAS protocol of which we are a signatory, that allows transhumance which means you can bring cattle from Senegal from Mali from Burkina Faso to Nigeria and vice versa. Even there is a clause there that says: you can refuse this entry if there are inimical to your security, but it is difficult to enforce sometimes because of the sheer size of our country and the sheer size of our borders. Now, while we have the challenges, we must also please understand that there is nothing ethnic, there is nothing religious in the herdsmen farmers clashes. I always give 2 examples- the first example is Kebi state. In Kebi state, the cattle rustlers are Hausa –Fulani and are Muslims, their victims are also Hausa-Fulani that are Muslims. In Zamfara, the herdsmen are Hausa-Fulani, the farmers are Hausa-Fulani, they all Muslims so anybody that tries to read any ethnic meaning or religious meaning into pure criminality is being mischievous.

Iyore James: Yeah, but that is the news we hear, right? That is the news we get.

Hon Lai Mohammed: You see, Dr. Iyore, it is a deliberate attempt by people to ethicize and religionize an issue that is purely security and purely to do with the economy. Look when we talk about herdsmen farmers clashes, it is nothing but scramble for scarce resources i.e., water, grass, and light. Now, banditry and kidnapping are a completely different beast. You see, cattle rustling, and banditry is more prevalent in the northwest because over time, the Fulani's livestock became depleted due to cattle rustling. Those Fulani nomads who were devoid of their cattle went to the cities and became handy for criminal groups.

But the main issue we have today is what I call ethnic profiling. The ethnic profiling is worse in the North than in the South West and the South East. The bandits are in the forest because they claim they are being persecuted in the cities. They say when they go to the market, the Hausa's will identify them as Fulani, as criminals, and kill them. So, they now went back into the forest, made themselves into militias and started kidnapping.

Iyore James: Even the kidnappings happening in the South?

TO BE CONTINUED...