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Lagos and 'deportation' of northern beggars

By Steve Ogbonmwan

THE recent "deportation" or more precisely, relocation of beggars of northern extraction from Lagos to Kaduna, the de-facto capital of the North, has generated a lot of comments and controversy. When I placed the news on the World Wide Web, I was convinced it will generate a lot of comments, may be anger in some quarters.

I personally remarked that "this is a very serious development in inter Nigerian states' relations and would request cautious comments." I added that "this act brings to the fore once more, the issues of "indigenous" Nigerians and "settlers" within the geographical expression called Nigeria' For one, Nigeria is a signatory to the covenant on the Rights of People with Disability (CRPD) and its Optional Protocol.

This may be regarded as a clear violation of the rights of the disabled. In addition, their Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) and by implication their right to life have been violated. In a country with the constitution of a Federal Republic, should not all Nigerian citizens have a right of abode anywhere in the country? Could the problem be traced to the fact that, there is too much concentration of power in the centre and lack of true federalism in the nation? Since the issue has once again become the underlying factor in taking decisions by those in authority, why has the National Assembly not dealt with the issue once and for all?

A lot of lives were lost during the Jos crisis because of the issue of who is a "settler" or "indigene" in a particular area of that city.

It is the misinterpretation of this notion by our northern brothers and subsequent ill-advised actions that usually leads to the loss of life and property of Nigerians of southern origin when the almajaris go on rampage as they usually do with directives from their political godfathers.

For a long time now, beggars are dumped in southern Nigerian states after some of them may have received sharia punishments by the amputation of their upper or lower limbs and hands and loss of one or both eyes. Some of them may be victims of polio who could have been saved with polio vaccination which the northern leaders' religious fanatics prevent as they believe that polio vaccines may contain agents that can make their females infertile which is obviously not true.

We are pleased that the recent polio vaccine take up has risen in some parts of the northern states like Kogi and Adamawa States thanks to their governments and grassroots counseling.

Most Nigerians who have commented on the issue of relocation of beggars believe that the disabled beggars have been brought to the southern states, especially Lagos, due to the failure of leadership by the northern governors and their various state governments; since the main purpose of begging is to seek funds for livelihood.

These disabled men and women; no matter the cause of their disability, have a right to existence anywhere within the confines of the Nigerian state. Second, those who meted out sharia punishment that caused their disability have a moral and civic responsibility to help integrate these unfortunate Nigerians back into their communities or betterstill, ensure they are kept in government run institutions where education, health services and welfare care, are made available at the expense of the government.

In fairness to Fashola's administration, it has written to various northern states' governments to take their disabled citizens home for better care instead of leaving them to roam the streets of Lagos with its high volume of traffic and risks of road traffic accidents. They did not heed the advice.

There is no doubt that disabled and non-disabled Nigerians have equal rights to live wherever they choose and move around as they please but the situation of begging along highway is very disheartening as these beggars have a right to a decent living quarters, healthcare at the expense of the various states' governments. It will, therefore, be unfair to leave Lagos State government alone to bear the responsibility of caring for disabled beggars of northern states' origin.

I hope this discussion will ultimately lead to improved care for our disabled people .

The dumping of ill relatives to beg is not only confined to North to South, trafficking of the disabled, there is also East to West trafficking of leprosy patients to a spot on the Lagos-Benin expressway where they congregate and beg for arms from travelers.

My personal investigation revealed that these leprosy patients have a sanatorium provided by the meager resources of Edo State government but they still leave the perimeter of their abode and go begging on the expressway as vehicles crawl along due to the poor state of the road.

It is believed that Lagos State is already being treated unfairly as the taxes and VAT collected from alcohol are taken to Abuja for disbursement to all states including the Sharia states in the North where alcohol is prohibited. The logic should be if a Sharia state forbids alcohol, it should not benefit from the funds (VATs and taxes) accruing from it.

The most logical solutions are that the senate should revisit the constitution and fashion it in a way that there would no longer be settlers in the nation, they should also revisit the Land Use Decree which has robbed indigenes of their ancestral lands.

Commonsense should dictate that every Nigerian should be able to live anywhere in Nigeria lawfully and without hindrances but northern states should also not always start these religious conflicts of asking southerners to leave the North such that when they resist, the almajaris resort to killing and maiming them especially the Christians among them.

second, they should, as a matter of policy, desist from moving disabled Nigerians from one state of the federation to the other; rather, they should care for them in a designated and comfortable environment. Third, they should administer the Sharia law with caution in order to reduce the number of those who are deliberately disabled for very minor offences.

Futhermore, state governments should, as a matter of urgency, provide disabled homes and disability allowance for our disabled brothers and sisters to enable them lead near normal lives and stop street begging.

Finally, begging is an undignified way of eking a living therefore, no one has the right to beg and this should be enforced by state governments. But this should be done after providing them with the needed quarters.

Ogbonmwan sent this article via steveogbonmwan@aol.com

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