Drama at Cairo airport as Egyptian policemen frame Nigerian cleric for sexual assault

Date: 2024-06-08

Source: https://thenationonlineng.net/drama-at-cairo-airport-as-egyptian-policemen-frame-nigerian-cleric-for-sexual-assault/

Drama at Cairo airport as Egyptian policemen frame Nigerian cleric for sexual assault  
  
How Nigerian pilgrims resisted threat to jail clergyman  
  
Embattled cleric: My wife, children lost sleep learning about my plight  
  
Egypt Airline, Foreign Affairs Ministry decline comment  
  
Officials of Cairo International Airport in Egypt appear to be becoming notorious for dehumanising international travellers especially, black Africans. During the week, a Nigerian cleric, Rev. Israel Kristilere of the ShepherdHill Baptist Church, Obanikoro, Lagos, shared a video reliving how he escaped being framed up and jailed for sexual assault by police authorities in the North African country. Before now, South Sudanese and Yemeni travellers had alleged harassment, extortion and other inhuman treatments by the airport’s officials. INNOCENT DURU spoke with Kristilere and other pilgrims who witnessed the Cairo airport incident and reports.  
  
Rev. Israel Kristilere, the Senior Pastor of SheperdHill Baptist Church, Obanikoro, Lagos and chief executive officer (CEO) of Oasis of Faith Intercontinental Limited, a private Christian pilgrimage company, in a viral video during the week, called the attention of Nigerians and the government to the alleged atrocities being perpetrated against the citizens by Egyptian policemen at Cairo Airport.  
  
According to him, he was framed up with the accusation that he sexually assaulted a woman he had not seen or met in his entire life. He was threatened with a jail term and subjected to all manners of mental torture to make him admit to a crime he never committed. He, however, stood his ground, insisting that he was innocent of the allegation.  
  
While he was doing battle with the police officers in the closet, his compatriots, buoyed by the never-say-die Nigerian spirit, defied the freezing weather condition and resisted the pressure mounted on them by the pilot and the cabin crew to board the plane that was taking them to Israel and stoutly demanded the release of their leader.  
  
At the centre of the battle was Mrs. Chiyenre Ofoha, who was with Rev. Kristilere at the business class lounge before he was whisked away by the police.  
  
Although they succeeded in securing the clergyman’s release, Ofoha was still struggling to overcome the trauma caused her by the ugly incident when our correspondent called her on the phone during the week.  
  
“I was terrified within me when all that was happening. I was very scared,” she said.  
  
“Secondly, I didn’t know where we could head to at that point in time. I told you the cold was freezing when all this was going on.  
  
“I was trying to reach Pastor on the phone but none of his lines was reachable. There was nobody to talk to at that point in time. I was really, really terrified.”  
  
She recalled that before the police authorities came for Rev Kristilere, “we were both at the business class lounge. Each time I wanted to use the restroom, I would ask him to watch over my luggage. He also told me to watch over his luggage whenever he wanted to check on the other pilgrims.  
  
“When it was time for us to board, we both went downstairs. I noticed that they were not talking to us and I asked him if it was not time for us to board. He said maybe they wanted to check on our visa.  
  
“He walked up to them to ask if they were not attending to us and they said they were about to do. They later they asked him to step aside.  
  
“He asked me to wait because he felt that they wanted to attend to both of us separately. Before we knew it, about 15 policemen asked him to follow them.  
  
“Initially, I thought it was all about checking our documents. Later, I noticed some suspicious movements and went to ask an airport official what was happening. He responded that he does not speak English.  
  
“But I doubted the official’s claim that he does not speak English. There is no way you would work in an international airport without being able to speak English, because it is not everybody that comes to the airport that speaks your language.  
  
“But the Egyptian officials pretended that they could not speak English. I stood my ground, asking if there was no official that understood English and could interpret what was going on.”  
  
Mrs Ofoha said by that time, the other pilgrims had gone to board the plane and she was left there with one other man.  
  
“They asked me to go and board but I refused. I insisted that I must know what was going on.  
  
“I was subsequently directed to their boss who told me on enquiry that one of the ladies said that the reverend father wanted to rape her.  
  
“I asked them if it happened here or elsewhere. I told them I wanted to know when it happened.  
  
“I demanded to be taken to where they had taken him to, because we were together at the lounge before they took him away.  
  
“The man said there was a witness and I asked them to play the video at the airport since there would always be one there. The man said I should stop bothering myself; that they will play the video.  
  
“They continued putting pressure on me to go and board with the other people. Knowing that the other pilgrims did not know what was going on, I quickly ran to them and told them what was happening, and that it would not be proper for us to board the plane and leave our leader behind. They all agreed.  
  
“The pilot too was asking us to enter the plane. And to make matters worse, there was so much cold. But we defied the pressure and the cold, insisting that we must know what was happening to reverend and secure his release.  
  
“They did not want me to go and testify that I had been with him all through. We told them they could fly if they wanted, but we would not unless we secured the pastor’s release.  
  
“I think the pilot had to place a call to the officials to tell them that we were not boarding. Some members of the cabin crew even came down to appeal to us to board.  
  
“The flight was delayed for more than one hour before they brought Pastor back to us. It was after that that we agreed to board.”  
  
Ofoha noted that the other pilgrims were not harassed.  
  
She said: “They were only forcing us to enter the aircraft.  
  
Related News  
  
“At a point, we joined hands and agreed in prayer that whatever they were doing to Pastor should fail.  
  
“The Egyptians were looking at us as we were praying.”  
  
The group captain of the pilgrims travelling with Rev Kristilere, Yemi Amure, said the experience affected him psychologically. “I have read in so many news media how innocent people have been framed for political, drug peddling, racketeering crimes among others, but to witness it, was unbelievable. That it was against a man of God really baffled me. Throughout my entry and egress at the last three airports that we passed through, l was apprehensive and paranoid, thinking that someone might try to frame me. It was a terrible experience that I will not wish my enemy.  
  
We left Lagos in good spirit and looked forward to an incredible spiritual experience! The flight itself was smooth, except for one or two minor turbulence. We landed at the Cairo Airport around 2100 hours, for our connecting flight to Amman, Jordan.  
  
Our flight to Amman was to leave at about 0125 hours on May 01 2024, hence we all remained at the airport lobby waiting for procedure instruction until our Group leader, and organiser of the pilgrimage Rev Kristilere eventually led us to a gate for our connecting flight, and left with a lady, another pilgrim who I later learnt flew Business Class, to the Business Class lobby until they appeared again sometime after 12 midnight, probably to ensure that all pilgrims had boarded. On seeing us still standing around, Rev Kristilere asked why we were not boarding. When he was told that the airport officials asked us to wait, he asked why and the airport official insisted that we step aside and let these people enter first: referring to some light skinned people whom I believe were Arabs or from North Africa.  
  
After Rev Kristilere was whisked away, he said “it dawned on me that our leader might miss the flight. Soon, the news of the abduction of our leader leaked out to other pilgrims, and there and then it was decided that no one was going through the security checks unless our leader was released back to us. As we stood our ground that no boarding of any pilgrim would take place without seeing our leader, one security officer (I knew he was an officer by his uniform) suddenly stood up and started shouting, gesticulating and threatening arrest if we did not go through security checks and board the transit bus to the tarmac. He continued to raise his voice, and aggressively shoving whoever stood in his way. It was at this point that one of the pilgrims, one Hon Kunle Elegbede said “no one is going nowhere, without our leader”. His wife also said the same thing and before you can say Jack Robinson, the entire pilgrims echoed “Without our leader, we are going nowhere.”  
  
As the Group leader, I appealed for calm, thinking that all was well with our leader, unaware that a fabricated assault charge had been leveled against the man of God!  
  
When the airport officials realised that no amount of threat would move us to change our minds, one of them came down from the aircraft to address us. He promised that if we boarded, he would ensure that Pastor and leader would be released. We refused. At this stage the official left in a vehicle and within three minutes our leader was brought in a vehicle to join us. And that was the end of the fabricated assault allegation against an innocent Man Of God. As for me and my family, no more flying with EgyptAir.”  
  
Egypt Airline, Foreign Affairs Ministry’s spokesman decline comment  
  
Efforts made to get the spokesman of Egypt’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Amb Ahmed Abu Zeid, to comment on the incident were unsuccessful. He did not respond to our message on X, formerly Twitter.  
  
Egypt Air, which airlifted the pilgrims, also declined comment. Like the MFA spokesman, the airline failed to respond to a message sent to its X handle.  
  
The Egyptian embassy in Nigeria was also yet to respond to our inquiry on the ugly development.  
  
The Nigerian Foreign Affairs Ministry’s response was also yet to be received at the time of filing this report.  
  
The spokesman, Amb Abu-Obe Eche, requested to see the video shared by Rev. Kristilere. He was yet to comment after the video was sent to him.  
  
Yemeni, South Sudanese travellers decry dehumanisation incidents at Cairo Airport  
  
Findings revealed that the Rev. Kristilere incident was not the first time Cairo International Airport officials would harass and dehumanise international travellers. In 2021, some Yemenis wrote a petition decrying the actions of the airport officials.  
  
The petition reads in part: “Passengers travelling to and from Yemen through Cairo Airport have been mistreated by Cairo Airport employees. The mistreatment has been going on for years and has become worse over the last two years.  
  
“Numerous videos have surfaced on social media platforms showing the specific targeting of passengers. Those passengers travelling to and from Yemen have been specially targeted by airport employees.  
  
“The passengers have been harassed and forced to give bribes for normal and routine services that are normally provided for free to other passengers.  
  
“Yemeni Americans have reached out to numerous congressional representatives and voiced their concerns over the mistreatment. The congressional representatives have advised the United States Embassy in Cairo.  
  
“While there are no formal complaints at the US Embassy, many passengers have complained to the airport authorities who have been quick to dismiss any complaints.  
  
“Complaints of mistreatment and harassment include: Solicitation of bribes for routine services offered for free to other passengers, including taking the bus from one terminal to the other and using the bathroom.  
  
“Theft of money, jewellery, cell phones and other valuable items.  
  
“Inappropriate confiscation of permissible items, including honey, coffee, and spices from checked baggage.  
  
“Illegally holding on to passenger’s passports for up to 10 hours, and not returning them unless they give a bribe. A Yemeni passport picture page was intentionally ripped because they refused to give a bribe.  
  
“Passengers being followed to bathroom. We are asking for the United States Embassy to request a full investigation from the Cairo Airport officials.”  
  
Prior to this time, South Sudanese travellers had accused the airport authorities of calling them slaves.  
  
Speaking about the incident, an official from the Government of Southern Sudan office in Cairo told the local newspaper, Sudan Tribune, that “if the Egypt Air flight to Juba is intended to insult South Sudanese and to humiliate them, please stop Egypt Air flights to Juba! As prior to initiating Egypt Air flight to Juba, Southerners are using Ethiopian Airlines, and they were never insulted and humiliated. “Egypt Air has to stop their mentality of mistreatment and harassment towards South Sudanese black people if they really wanted good relationship with South Sudan, or otherwise there is no need for Egypt Air to schedule its flights to Juba as this date. And I urge our fellow South Sudanese brothers and sisters in Europe and USA to avoid travelling to Juba through Egypt, but via Kenya or Uganda to avoid Egyptian humiliation and harassment.”