

## **Nigeria's Jos Plateau – “Land of Peace and Tourism”**

They call Nigeria's Jos Plateau “the land of peace and tourism”, but the visitor that has been haunting this Nigerian state has been mayhem, destruction and death. This plateau in central Nigeria has long been known for its mineral wealth, its archaeological riches and its temperate climate. It would seem to have everything needed for “peace and tourism”. It has also been a meeting grounds – an area common to both the Nigerians from the north (who are largely Muslim) and those from the South (who are largely Christian).

In January, attacks by Christians killed some 200 Muslims, and several months later (March), attacks by northern Muslims killed some 3-400 Christians – predominantly women and children. In one horrific massacre, a village of Christians was surrounded, nets were put up in front of the homes and as the people fled their homes, they were entrapped in the nets and hacked to death with machetes.

Christian leaders charged that the military had been forewarned of these impending attacks and did nothing. They also charged that the attackers were mercenaries from across the border in Chad and Niger. According to Human Rights Watch, since 1999, some 13,500 people in the Plateau have lost their lives due to such slaughters.

### **Background**

Nigeria was carved out of a portion of Africa by the British colonialists. They established Nigeria partially as an administrative unit and partly in order to keep fellow colonial robbers at bay. Thrown together out of dozens of different ethnic groups, colonial Nigeria was ruled by the British by balancing on the ruling circles in each different ethnic region. Thus, when Nigeria achieved its independence, this form of rule persisted - with each state resting on the rule of a different ethnic group. Those of the particular ethnic group held special rights in their “own” state. Rather than lessening the ethnic tensions, this arrangement only increased the ethnic identity, thus increasing the potential for ethnic rivalries. The Christian-Muslim rivalry is not simply religious in nature; behind it lies an ethnic/tribal rivalry also. At the national level, the Nigerian capitalist class as well as international imperialism attempted to keep the Christian-Muslim tension at bay through a power sharing arrangement in which the presidency was alternated between a Christian and Muslim.

Due to its location, the Jos Plateau was and remains a meeting grounds for northerners and southerners – Muslims and Christians. As such, all the tensions between these two groups is built into the state. On the one hand, there are the tensions between the largely traditionally nomadic herders from the north and the pastoralists from the South – tensions that revolve around competition for land. A region rich in mineral wealth, the Plateau has seen a drastic decline in mining in recent decades. This is not due to exhaustion of these minerals but first, for a period, a collapse in mineral prices. When the prices went back up, international mining companies did not invest in the Plateau because they – as well as the Nigerian capitalist class – had done nothing to build up the infrastructure in the state. The railroads had been allowed to decay to the state where it was near-impossible to transport the minerals to Nigeria's ports. This collapse of the mining industry meant not only increased unemployment – meaning increased competition for jobs – but also a weakening of the working class in the region. Thus, the

corrupt and degenerate capitalist class could not provide any semblance of a power that could overcome the divisions, and the working class had been seriously weakened and found it difficult to play this role independently.

### **Nigerian Labour Congress**

This weakening of the working class, however, has not been strictly an objective process; at least as important is the “subjective” factor – the role of the class’s leadership, and here it is necessary to see the crisis in Jos in a national context. The leadership of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) is reformist at best, and outright corrupt at worst. While there is a Nigerian Labour Party, almost all accounts agree that it has been captured by a gang of corrupt capitalist politicians – so much so that it is impossible to tell from afar if it is even a workers’ party in any sense of the word. Meanwhile, the NLC leadership continues to rely on and sow illusions in the capitalist politicians such as newly installed president Goodluck Johnson. This opportunist leadership is thus incapable of playing an independent role in the Jos Plateau, incapable of leading a fight of by and for the Jos workers and the Nigerian working class in general.

As in almost all such cases of ethnic/communal slaughters, competition for jobs, housing and for land plays an important role, and the situation in Jos is no exception. The collapse of the mining industry is one aspect, but there are other aspects too – ones which show how the depredations and degeneration not only of Nigerian capitalism but of global capitalism lay at the heart of the issue.

Given the degeneration of the Nigerian capitalist class, Nigeria has been ruled for decades on and off by military regimes. In fact, the military has been the one force that has been something of a national force in the country. Although Nigeria is presently under civilian rule, the unity of the military seems to be breaking down. The power sharing arrangement – under which the president is alternately a Christian and then a Muslim – has now collapsed, with another Christian (Johnson) installed as president. This division seems to be carrying over into the military, with wings of it increasingly under the influence of the reactionary Muslim nationalists. Inevitably, other wings will come under the influence of their Christian counterparts. In addition, there are claims – unverifiable from a distance – that the Muslim attackers have connections with al Qaeda-type groups. Whether true or not, it does not seem unlikely that reactionary, communalist elements within the Muslim population would be able to build something of a base given the world situation.

### **“Free Market Reforms”**

In addition, Nigeria has been undergoing its own “liberalization” in recent years. Under military and civilian rule alike, the government has been cutting back on subsidies for such basics as fuel and food, as a means of bowing to global capitalism. As Professor Mahmoud Mamdani of Columbia University has argued, *“The tendency of the market economy is to move more and more strata of the population away from the locality where they were born. This includes both rich and poor Nigerians: on the one hand, businessmen, industrialists, and professionals, and on the other, unemployed workers and landless peasants.”* Again, due to conditions of generalized want, this increases the ethnic tensions.

And the one thing there is aplenty in Nigeria is generalized want. Here's how one Nigerian described the situation: *"Our governments, since 1990 did not build roads, they did not build schools, they did not build hospitals, they did not build our infrastructural base to support the growing population and ensure a reasonable quality of life for the people. Nowhere is this failure to plan more evident than in the energy sector. In the absence of new power plants and the epileptic performance of the old plants, Nigerians are now living with candles and kerosene lanterns, a throw back to the dark ages.*

*"No new refineries built in years, meaning refined products must be imported. But antiquated docking facilities mean tankers must be offloaded away from docks by smaller boats. Entire process means vastly increased costs, then paid for by government subsidies, which are now being cut."*

Even global warming is involved. On the northern border of Nigeria lies Lake Chad. Partly due to global warming and partly due to unplanned and chaotic use of the lake's tributary rivers, the lake has been drawn down to a mere 10% of its former size. This has meant that peoples who for centuries lived around the lake and made their living from fishing, as well as farming (using the lake's waters for irrigation) are forced to move.

### **Oil – "Drill and Kill in Nigeria"**

Nor should Nigeria's enormous oil wealth be forgotten. As in almost every oil exporting country, this wealth has not led to a better life for ordinary Nigerians; rather, it has attracted the most voracious of international capitalists who have teamed up with the most corrupt and degenerate of elements of the Nigerian bourgeoisie and its military. As one Nigerian put it: *"There is a symbiotic relationship between the military dictatorship and the multinational companies who grease the palms of those who rule.... They are assassins in foreign lands. They drill and they kill in Nigeria."*

When Leon Trotsky explained that capitalism could not develop the former colonial world as it had the imperialist powers, he could have been thinking of Nigeria close to 100 years later. Rather, what is needed is for the Nigerian working class to take power and democratically plan the economy of Nigeria. As the most populous nation in the continent, this step would almost immediately lead to a socialist revolution sweeping Africa. Then, Africa would lead the world not in poverty and ethnic slaughter, but in the resolution of the crises that beset the planet.