

NIGHT TRAVEL

The sorrow and nightmare

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WHEN I was told that I would accompany Mr. Kalu Okwara to Kano for an assignment on Friday, May 26, 2006, I felt excited. I enthusiastically looked forward to the trip, which was scheduled for the following Monday for obvious reasons. Since I come from Kano State, I regarded the assignment as an opportunity to reunite with friends and relations even though briefly. But more than that it would be my first experience working with a senior colleague on a major assignment of the nature we were going for.

Consequently, when I was directed to ensure that I was at Oyingbo motor park by 7.00am on Monday as were going to board the morning bus, I knew that the trip had at last become a reality. I got to the park even earlier than that.

My arrival at the park before my boss paid off. As I was not used to travelling

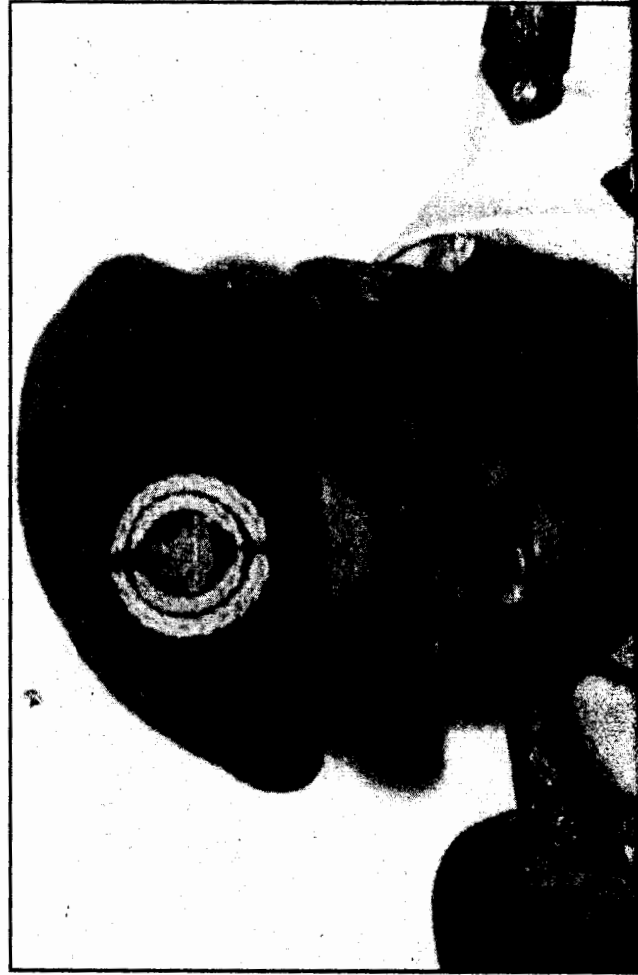
of the NAMA premises. Upon inquiry, we were told that the parcel of land allocated to the NAMA, many years ago had been lying fallow, following which the former governor, Alhaji Rabiu Kwakwanso applied to the Ministry of Aviation to take back the land, a request that was said to have been granted. So the Alhaji Ibrahim Shekarau's administration decided to use the land for a housing estate. But when Alhaji Kwakwanso became special adviser to the president, he allegedly prevailed on the Aviation minister, Dr Babalola Borishade to revoke the leasing of the land to Kano State.

So on that Tuesday, which was supposed to be our first day of concrete business in Kano, was not, as confusions reigned leading to the the PDP relocating to a new venue for their rally where Alhaji

just less than a metre to where another fallen truck (911) Mercedes Benz was, what followed was cries, of agony, trapped passengers wailing and struggling to come out of the bus in the dark in the serene village of Owura-Oka near Akumagba, the University town in Ondo State.

I had trouble in finding where to escape because not only was I confused, but I was also scared that the bus might go up in flames. I didn't know how a got to where I found myself. I hurled myself out through the window. While I was outside I realised that Mr Okwara was still inside. But when I called out to him, he answered from inside the shattered bus. I got relieved a bit. He then told me to flash him the light from my handset torch which I did as he searched for our luggage, and sandals. These he lifted up to me before he finally came out too.

It was after everybody had come out that we heard a faint, voice of an Air force officer who was thrown off the window but was lucky to have been thrown into a hollow before the bus fell over him. It took us over



in luxurious buses, I tactfully went and secured two seats for both of us in a station wagon Peugeot 504 after which I called him on the telephone to find out where he was. He told me he was on his way and that I should ensure that I secure two seats for us before he got to the park. That was when I told him that I had already got the seats in a car. He did not object.

Happily, we had a jolly ride to Kano State without any eventuality. However, there was palpable fear of anarchy in Kano, following the withdrawal of police permit granted the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) to have their rally at the National Airspace Management Authority (NAMA) ground.

The fear heightened last Tuesday as anti-riot policemen were drafted to all strategic points in Kano metropolis. What led to this action, we understood was because the ruling party in the state, All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), had also gone ahead to schedule the launching of housing estate at the same venue the same time, when the PDP insisted they would go ahead with their rally.

This led to the intervention of the Inspector-General of Police, who directed that both parties should steer clear

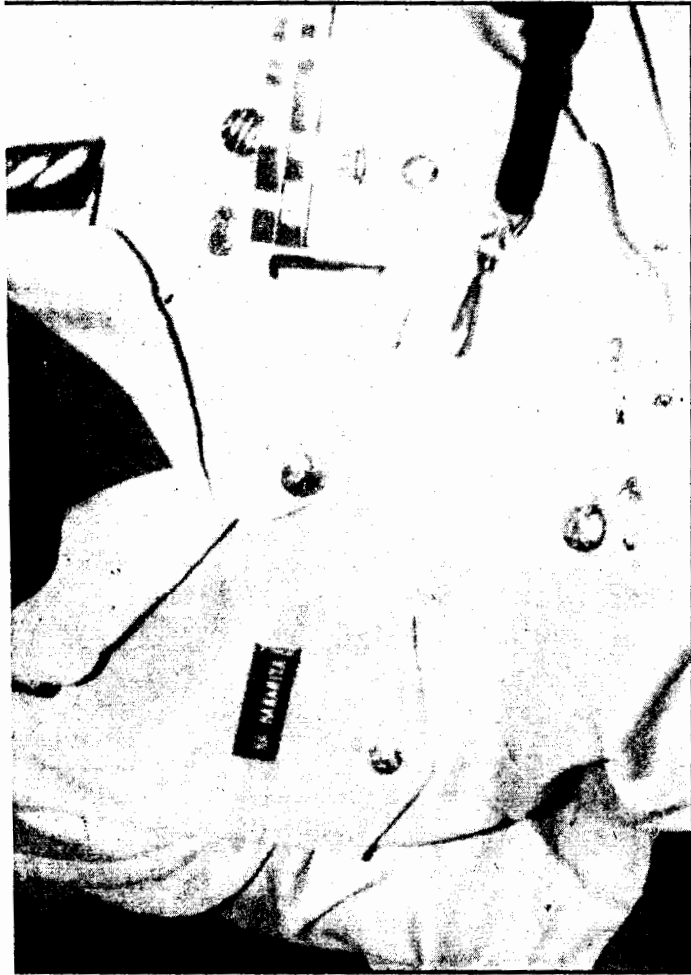
ANPP declared for the PDP.

From that day, my instincts told me that something untoward was going to happen. I only committed everything to God's hands. But when on Thursday, after having an interview with the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Alhaji Ghali Na'abba at his Sharada, Kano residence, Mr Okwara said we were going to take a night bus back to Lagos instead of the following day when we were supposed to leave.

So we headed to C.N. Okoli's terminus at Igbo Road by Sani Abacha way, Kano to buy our tickets around 3:00pm, and were told the bus, the only remaining Buscar in their fleet would be leaving Kano by 5:00pm but we did not leave Kano until 8:00pm. Our seats number were 19 and 20, while Mr. Okwara sat on window (19).

As we boarded the bus, my heart kept beating. I kept cursing myself for not

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•Maj. Gen. Haladu Hamaniya, Corps Marshal, FRSC

being courageous enough to convince my boss that to delay the trip till the following day.

Being my first time of a luxurious bus, the speed at which the driver was driving, frightened me and this drove away any trace of sleep from my

eyes. Ironically, nearly all the passengers on board seemed not to have bothered at all as they all slept off soundly.

Some times I would close my eyes so as not to notice the speed the man was driving, vowing never to board a luxurious bus after that experience.

Unknown to me, danger still lay ahead of us. As we got to Issua in Edo State, our driver halted and handed over the steering to his co-driver. Who we later learnt was recently employed, having been with F.G Onyenwe and Sons Ltd and is not used to the Okene-Owo-Lagos

road we took. Immediately he took over the steering, I knew his own speed was going to be worse than the first driver because of the way the bus jerked on his first take off. This made me to sit upright once more.

He had not driven us for more than 30 minutes when eventually what my instinct has been telling me happened. As he entered into a very sharp bend in top speed, he lost control of the bus and all we heard was a loud explosion. The bus fell by its side, screeching on the road for about 30 meters before it finally stopped

out. But one other man, an Hausa businessman who was coming to buy something in Lagos and go back the following day was not lucky. He was trapped from the chest to his head by the bus and there was no way we could lift the bus to save him so he died there.

Although all passing vehicles stopped at the scene, none of them agreed to give any assistance as they zoomed off once they ascertained that it was an accident. This lasted till about 5:00am when another luxurious bus that belonged to C.N. Okoli stopped. This one, we learnt loaded after we had left Kano. The driver was very helpful. He carried all the passengers off the scene of the accident to Owura Oka General Hospital which was about two kilometers away. It was here we took those passengers whose injuries were very critical for treatment.

No fewer than 30 people were seriously injured among whom were two female Corps members, we did not leave the hospital until about 10:00 am, leaving behind the Air force officer.

Till today, the shock of the accident has not left me. Anytime a car or bus I am traveling in jerks, it would appear to me that it is going to fall and my heart would skip a beat.