

# Bakassi: Tears, suffering



• Inside one of the returnees' camps

Following the official handover of the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon, some state governments have taken steps to re-absorb their indigenes who opted to leave the ceded area. Correspondent, **DENNIS NAKU**, who has paid several visits to the temporary camps housing the over 10,333 returnees of Bayelsa origin in Yenagoa, writes on the condition the displaced persons live in.

ON October 10, 2002 when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) sitting at The Hague, Switzerland finally delivered its verdict and ceded the disputed Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon, the government and the people of Nigeria did not find the decision pleasing at all.

The territory which is of immense and unquantifiable economic and social value, (very rich in oil) has been a major source of disagreement between Nigeria and Cameroon for more than two decades, so much so that at a point the situation almost snowballed into a major crisis.

During the formal and final handover of the Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon at a brief ceremony in Archibong town on Monday August 14, 2006, it finally dawned on the natives and most Nigerians that the territory was no longer theirs.

More worrisome is that neither the Federal Government nor the residents and or indigenes of Bakassi contemplated the aftermath of that handover; because little did they know that the task of resettling the Bakassi returnees would be such an uphill one.

Moreover, when the various state governments in a rather patriotic zeal and commitment volunteered to absorb its indigenes in order to properly cater for them and possibly resettle and re-unite them with their families, they may have seen it as an ordinary relief mission.

Today, some states particularly those within the South-South and South-East geo-political zones obviously due to its proximity to the ceded territory which makes them greater recipients of the returnees, have opened or provided temporary camp shelter for them pending proper resettlement, a situation which naturally confers on them the status of displaced people. A visit to some of the camps in the affected states tells the story in details.

Some civil society organizations and other concerned citizens described the plight of the returnees as a tale of sorrow, weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth.

In Bayelsa State for instance, which has about the greatest recipient of the returnees, the state government opened up three centres which have served as some kind of sanctuary to the victims. These are Saint Jude's Girls' Secondary School, Ministry of Women Affairs Nursery and Primary School and the Sports Complex hall.

Having been transported to the state in trenches, the number of returnees of Bayelsa state origin have catapulted to about 10,000. At least, the Deputy Governor, Hon. Peremobowei Ebebi, confirmed this, in a recent interaction with journalist when he lamented that the facilities at the centres have been overstretched and are now begging for rehabilitation. So when the news broke out that five of the displaced persons have died due to what sources blamed on poor sanitary conditions at the camps, it did not surprise anyone.

The facilities have been stretched to the limits due to the large number of displaced persons occasioned by infiltration of the camps by unemployment and misguided youths in the state following the decision of the state government to pay all adult returnees a daily allowance of N1000 to alleviate their sufferings, according to the Deputy Governor.

When Gov. Goodluck Jonathan paid an unscheduled visit to see the victims and the facilities housing the returnees he, immediately directed that medical personnels be dispatched to the camps to cater for the displaced persons pending when they would be relocated to their respective communities.

Consequently eight medical doctors, two pharmacists, 15 nurses, 10 Para medics, eight recorders and six ambulances, were deployed to the centres with military precision.

After announcing a daily allowance of N1000 per adult, Dr Jonathan explained that as parts of its resettlement effort, government would provide fishing implement for those skilled in it and also encourage them to form co-operative societies, while those that are employable would stand the chance of getting appointments.

He added that government would immediately commence the building of transit camps as a pro-active step to the problems that may face subsequent returnees and other displaced persons.

This reporter who visits the camp daily, observed that heaps of refuse litter the camps with all manner of wastes, leaving a strong stench hanging in the air, while one could not help but ponder in

a wave of nausea how the returnees survive in such environment. For the children, they meander innocently with joyous ecstasy the pernicious debris that dot the precinct of each of the camps.

The situation seems worse at the Sports Complex, which is usually a venue for very important functions and events in the state, as the entire in-door hall, the terraces and outside are now the abode of the Bakassi returnees. At the Ministry of Women Affairs nursery and primary school classrooms, the returnees sleep in the rooms while most of their belongings lay helplessly outside the rooms due to lack of space. The situation is not any different at St. Jude's Girls Secondary School where there are open windows, stagnant water and marshy environment which lay to rest, the complaints of the inhabitants that mosquitoes feast uncontrollably on their children.

At the moment, the complaints of the returnees are legion. Mr. Abaka Ogboma 45, who hails from Sagbama Local Government Area, intimated these reporters that most of them have lost their properties in transit from Bakassi. He said the state Governor was giving them N10,000 to return to their communities but lamented that the amount would not do anything for them hence, some have resorted to selling their personal belongings, even as they are yet to offset their debts.

He stated that the N1000 promised them was only given them twice (Saturday and Sunday) on their first week of arrival since a fortnight ago. According to him, "Cameroon Government no drive; us na dem (referring to Federal and state governments) say make we come".

Blessing, who hails from Yenagoa, complained that officials from a particular ministry told them that returnees from Gbarien/Yenagoa local government area are not recognized in the payment of N10,000 resettlement allowance since they hail from Yenagoa by the capital, saying for that reason they would remain at the compound and die of hunger, even as she pointed at her two children both of whom are sick.

Another lady who simply gave her name as Helen related how she had had to cater for her four children in the absence of food and water at the camp, her major problem is how to ensure that her two children who were schooling in Bakassi return to school, as her husband does not have anything doing again since they were dislodged from the oil rich peninsula.

For Karaide Victor 36, "there is no food here they have not paid us, but in Calabar we eat three square-meals. Nigeria Government ask us to come home that they will take care of us. For most of us, it is our first time to come to Bayelsa State because we were born in Bakassi. Betraying felings of nostalgia, he says the only problem they had in Cameroon was the taxes and levies; otherwise he would have returned to the ceded territory.

In a fit of hanger, Mr. Fishing-Pot Sokebulo from Torubene in Ekeremo local governments area called on the state government to expedite payment, saying the returnees deserve a good amount to enable them return to their communities and start a small business.



Gov. Goodluck Jonathan of Bayelsa State



# in returnees' camps

• continued from pg. 14

He told *Daily Champion* that he had come all the way to check his elder brother's son and other relations, adding that he is ready to take them home, except that they have not been paid even as he lamented that he is not happy with the condition of his people.

Similarly, a mother of five who gave her name as Clara Jumbo, bemoaned the absence of electricity at the camp, saying mosquitoes have feasted on her children all of whom are now sick and hungry.

Initially when yours truly approached her, she jumped and embraced this reporter with an awesome smile that was suggestive that hope and succour had come to her doorstep. It took this reporter time to convince her that I was going to help her through this article.

She explained that government had promised to give them a daily up-keep allowance of N1000, but that the amount had only reached them once over a week ago even as she noted that some most children have died, while calling on government to save the lives of her children.

Somehow as these complaints began to grow louder and louder, the stage was set for a possible demonstration when on Monday September 4 they grouped and regrouped from Mbiama in the Yenagoa end, leading to Creak Haven, the seat of power in the state in protest of their poor conditions.

The demonstrating returnees numbering over 500, disrupted the flow of traffic on the busy road forcing motorists and cyclist at Amarata to make a detour, while those coming from Yenagoa were compelled to use the new Julius Berger expressway, when the timely intervention of a detachment of anti-riot policemen prevented the situation, as the latter succeeded in persuading them to return to their camps.

Checks by *Daily Champion* revealed that the returnees were scared of recording further deaths due to the poor sanitary conditions which to a large extent was their own making as well as the no-food situation.

But reacting to the incident, the state Deputy Governor, Hon. Ebibi noted that government had made approvals for the returnees, but lamented that somehow they began to make some outrageous demands that people who have been in the state have not even contemplated. He noted that the state is one of the highest recipients of the Bakassi returnees. Presently over 10, 000 which has over-stretched the available facilities at their camps; saying they have never had it this bad.

Ebebi advised them to desist from such demands, just as he reminded that they had travel to Bakassi out of their own free will; but that the state government remains committed to ensure that they are properly resettled and reunited with their families.

Also speaking to newsmen recently, the state commissioner for special duties, Mr. Ayebakuro Nelson, frowned at a situation where people who are not Bakassi returnees have infiltrated into the camps, which explains why facilities have been stretched to the limits thereby slowing down the process of moving them to their various communities, even as he dismissed speculations that government was going to pay them N120, 000 naira each, but assured that everything was being done to fully integrate them into their communities and give them a sense of belonging.

Mrs. Marie Ekewe operates a small restaurant in addition to selling petty food items and provisions adjacent the Women Affairs Hall, one of the abodes of the returnees. She is filled with milk and human kindness, when she discussed the plight of her people. According to her, when I look this people, their condition bad. I dey give these small things we dem wan buy like garri and bread free. Some dey owe me two to three thousand naira dem no dey pay sef, because dem no hold anything."

The good Samaritan intimated *Daily Champion* that some may want to sell their personal effects or placed them as collateral in order to secure food to eat, "I beg make government come help them, this no be how human being go live," Ekewe posited.

With a score of the displaced persons jostling over her as at press time, she pointed that her shade is an extension of their camps because they sleep on all her tables and floor when she has closed for the day. She continued, "evening time come, I won close, they come sleep for my shade, so even now I de close quick make them come see place sleep."

One woman told *Daily Champion* that during the demonstration policemen fired teargas canisters at their camp, which made her and her two children very sick while others scampered to safety.

A pharmacist who gave his name as Robert, confirmed the incident when he said his teams were giving first remedy to some of the self-limiting problems of the returnees. He explained that some kids who sprained their ankle or had dislocation, and so on were, attended to, while other major cases are being referred to the Federal



• Diseases beckon at refuse dumps take over

Medical Centre (FMC) where government even offset, their bills for them, while other major cases are also treated free at the mobile clinic in the camp.

Unfortunately, now that the process of resettlement has begun, another problem has ensued. Over two hundred returnees who were traveling to Ekeremo Local Government Area after receiving their payment, were reportedly attacked by sea pirates who dispossessed them of huge sums of money, personal effects and other valuables, so that some who managed to find their way back to the camp, vowed never to return to their communities without adequate security from government.

One Esther 25, who spoke to *Daily Champion*, broke down in tears while nursing an injury on her right leg which she incurred during the attack by the sea pirates at the creeks, whom according to her had allotted territories at the creeks. She said there was no point returning to her community, because she had suffered enough, and do not want to die now because of N10, 000; insisting that she would remain in Yenagoa and look for something to do.

As the news of the attack by sea pirates filtered into the camps, those who hailed from the riverside areas immediately developed cold feet to return to their villages even when they have received the N10, 000 for fear of being attacked, stripped of their possessions or possibly killed by the marauding sea pirates.

But as the process of resettlement begins, the question is what are the implications with over 10,000 scattered all over the nook and cranny of the state with little or no visible means of survival. Already, the state Commissioner for Transport, Mrs. Ononye Beredugo, while answering questions from news men recently, explained that the initial number of Bakassi returnees the special committee worked with was 5,500, but expressed shock how the number dramatically increased to 10,333 even as she disclosed that 70 displaced persons who had initially received their N10, 000 transport fare return to their colleagues at the end of the day.

The Commissioner warned that government would hand over any persons found impersonating as displaced Bakassi returnees to the Police, just as she charged them to disist from making demands that are not realistic.

Investigations by *Daily Champion* revealed that the young girls among the returnees are already socializing and interacting freely especially at night when some active members of the opposite sex take advantage of their conditions to stabilize their emotions only to retire them to the camp with little or no take-home benefits.

Worried by this situation, some civil society groups are looking at the likely long-term effect. An activist based in the state, Mr. Nengi

because both the Federal and the State governments lack a quick response mechanism to emergency situations as the grim realities before the returnees have revealed.

The activist observed that the returnees have caused an astronomical rise in the state population and stated with emphasis that it would also lead to a corresponding increase in social vices, ranging from criminal activities, prostitution, HIV/AIDS.

"If you see them, there are no fishing or Agricultural implements ready. How many of them would survive from the neglect of the Nigerian state", he queried, saying this has remained part of the reason the Ijaw nation are agitating to control and manage its resources.

The senior IYC member disclosed that most of them have been brutalized by security personnel while in Cameroon, some have lost their properties and therefore do not deserve to suffer more now that they have returned to their homes. He called on the state government to intervene before the situation gets out of hand.

Corroborating the views of the activist, the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) appealed to the Federal Government to properly resettle all legitimate Nigerian returnees who are affected by the ceding of the oil rich Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. Secretary General, Bayelsa state chapter of the association, under the aegis of NANS zone 'B', Mr George Turner, made the call while briefing journalists in Yenagoa, the state capital.

Said he, "it is in the best interest of Nigerian students to see that our parents, brothers and sisters who are victims of the giving up of the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula to the Cameroon government do not suffer beyond what they are currently passing through. The students lamented that about five of the returnees of the state origin have died due to the poor conditions under which they are living in their camps after vacating the ceded area in pains, saying aids such as food items, clothes, toiletries, mosquito nets and beddings would go a long way to alleviate their plight and to forestall further cases of death or the possible outbreak of an epidemic."



• Mother and child in one of the camps



• The returnees protested the neglect in the camps

James says the situation is not the fault of the returnees, but part of the neglect of the Nigerian state which led to the loss of the oil rich territory to Cameroon. He explained that the Ijaws travel world wide, adding that most of them are naturally into fishing as shown by the displaced persons most of whom have contributed immensely to the fishing industry in Cameroon.

James who is the immediate past President, Ijaw Youths Congress (IYC) pointed out that the Federal Government ought to have played a leading role to properly resettle the displaced persons and wondered what the National Communities on Displaced Persons was inaugurated for, it not to look into such cases.

He lamented that some cheats and disgruntled elements have even cashed in on the situation to enrich themselves