

# THE WORLD NEWS II

## Mercy's personal tragedy

Category: **Wednesday column** | Published on Wednesday, 26 June 2013 05:00 | Written by Mohammed Haruna ndajika@yahoo.com 08059100107 (Text only)

Penultimate Tuesday must've been the saddest day in Mrs Mercy Lekwa's life. That day Mama Nnenna, as we call her, lost her precious son, Lekwa Okon Emagha, aka Bobo, in a twilight shooting at a filling station in Lokoja, Kogi State, an innocent victim of possibly sibling jealousies he knew nothing about.

My wife was the first to break the news of Bobo's death to me and it hit me like a sledge hammer. She and Mercy had been friends from the early nineties when she helped madam run her restaurant, since closed, along Sultan Road, Kaduna.

When her husband, Mr Okon Emagha, an aircraft engineer with the aviation pest control unit of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, died in 2001, he left her with four grown up kids to take care of. Bobo, 28, was the second and only male.

As a widow whose civil servant husband had left little behind, she could barely make ends meet. And as if to make her life even more miserable, her in-laws took over even the small asset he'd left behind by way of a modest bungalow he had built in his village, along with the furniture; among her husband's Igbo kin – Mr Emagha, like herself, was from Ohafia, Abia State – in-laws, for some inexplicable reasons, seem to see nothing wrong with taking over what should be the inheritance of a widow and her children.

Fortunately for her, Mercy was not the self-pitying lazy type. She was a good cook. She tries as best as she could to put her husband's death behind her and work hard, using her talent, to earn enough to fend for her kids. Again fortunately for her, all of them were decent and well-behaved.

As the man of the house, Bobo became its pillar. He did odd jobs here and there even while in school to help with the bills. He was not only hard working. He was also bright and full of initiative. Anytime anyone asked after him from her, as my wife often did, her face would light up as she told the person, "Bobo is my husband, my father, my wife, my brother, my everything!" And the girls, far from feeling sibling jealousy, adored their only brother.

This was the Bobo who was snatched the Tuesday before last from a mother that had come to depend so much on her son. His killing was the more tragic because it came only several days before he was to resume work after completing a five month course as one of 36 engineering staff the National Agency for Science and Engineering Infrastructure (NASENI), a parastatal of the Ministry of Science and Technology, had sent to Belorussia to improve their skills. Bobo had come tops in the group.

Worse still for Mercy, the death came only a couple of hours after he had called to tell her he was coming home over the weekend to see the rest of the family before resuming work.

His death came in the shape of a hired gun whose mission apparently was to kill the son of the owner of the petrol station in question. Bobo was a friend of the target of the alleged hired killer. His misfortune was that he was witness to the killing; obviously the alleged killer did not want to take any chances leaving any witnesses behind. With a suspect in the police net less than a week after the killings there is suspicion that Bobo's friend was killed because he was his father's favourite and as such was entrusted with running most the family's businesses.

The killing of Bobo and his friend was clearly symptomatic of the insecurity that has become so pervasive in the land, partly because it has become all too easy for anyone so minded to acquire arms, small firearms especially.

The story of Bobo's employment by NASENI and the tragedy it turned into for his mother is proof positive that the problem of this country has never really been our religious, ethnic or any other differences but the way our politicians and the rest of us alike have exploited those differences for selfish reasons. The story started over forty years ago in Keffi, Nasarawa State, when his mother went to live with an uncle as a young lady. The uncle got her a teaching job in one of the town's Native Authority primary schools.

As a young teacher she took a special interest in three of her pupils that liked to play truant. Day in day out she would pull their ears in, metaphorically speaking, and counsel them about the virtues of knowledge. They hated her for it but she persisted as if she was their mother.

Fast-forward to 2011. As Mercy herself told it, one evening she was waiting by the roadside along Sultan Road, Kaduna, for a commercial motor-cycle to get home when a jeep that had just driven past her stopped, reversed and parked besides her. The person seated in the "owner's corner" wound down the rear glass and spoke to her in familiar tone. He asked her if she did not recognise him. She said she didn't, all the time thinking the man was your typical Casanova who cannot resist anything in skirts and at the same time wishing he would just drive off and leave her alone.

Instead he alighted, walked to her side and told her the story of the three truant primary school pupils she had taken an exceptional interest in in Keffi. That awoke her memory. Well, said the man, he was the most notorious of the three. The man, it turned out, was Dr Mohammed Sani Haruna, the Director-General and Chief Executive of NASENI.

After realising who he was, she accepted his offer of a ride in his jeep to her home to meet with the rest of the family. There, he told them how their mother was God's instrument for what he has become.

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At the time only the girls were home. Their brother was away in Jos working with MTN as a contract staff. Like so many graduates he had found it difficult to get a job even though he had passed his Higher National Diploma in Electrical Engineering from Kaduna Polytechnic with distinction.

When their guest made to leave, he told "Mama," as he called her, to ask Bobo to send in his curriculum vitae to agency which was undertaking a recruitment exercise at the time. That was how Bobo eventually got his job at NASENI, after which he was posted to the parastatal's office in Okene, Kogi State.

For Dr Haruna it obviously did not matter that "Mama" was a Christian and Igbo and he was Muslim and Hausa. She had done him a good turn some 40 odd years ago and he thought he owed her to return the favour.

Since the death of her husband in 2001, life for Mercy had not been exactly a happy one. Not only were her in-laws rather nasty in taking away the modest asset her husband left behind, she also eventually lost his official quarters in Unguwan Rimi GRA, Kaduna, which had been sold to her under President Olusegun Obasanjo's monetization policy even after she had made the mandatory down payment of 10 per cent. She lost the house to a fellow Christian who conspired with some of the officials in charge of implementing the policy, only for that person to sell it to a rich Alhaji. As is the case every so often, in this case money, clearly, was thicker than religion.

Two Tuesdays ago, Bobo, as one of the few silver linings in the cloud under which she had lived for the past 12 years, was cut down in his prime. Life for Mercy must seem harsh, brutish and unfair. One can only pray that the Good Lord gives her and Bobo's sisters the fortitude to bear his great loss.