

How I escaped the bullets of my P.A.'s killers—IYC scribe Alagbariya

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Comrade Bristol Emmanuel Alagbariya is the National Secretary General of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and President Rivers Ijaw Professionals and Entrepreneurs Forum. In this interview with PRECIOUS DIKEWOHA, he expresses disappointment with the failure of the Amnesty Programme which IYC initiated. He also believes that oil exploration in the region has not benefited the people.

Your personal assistant was recently assassinated. What actually happened?

Well, I have been an activist right from my university days. I was in the Students Union Government (SUG) and other organisations in my community and local government. I have been a youth leader. It is something that has been part of me while I also handle my professional job as an engineer. We have been on the front line in the agitation for the Niger Delta youths and the Nigerian youths. There are so many activities I have embarked upon.

During the election period, we stood firm to protect democracy before the threat on my life. But as God would have it, I was not around when the assassins came. Some gunmen came into my office and killed my P.A. (personal assistant), Silvanus Otuenye. I was on my way to meet him before they killed him, and I asked myself what is the problem? We are free to express our political conviction. As the National Secretary of the Ijaw Youth Council, I have never stopped anybody from expressing him or herself. So I don't just know why they killed that young man.

But the police are still investigating the matter and I know that in no distant time, they will come up with their findings. I also want to use this medium to call on the Inspector General of police (IG) and the executive governor of Rivers State, Chief Nyesom Wike, to look critically into the matter. I thank God that the security in the state has improved dramatically.

Before the assassination threat on my life, they had assassinated one of my friends, Olala, on Ada George Road, Port Harcourt. We have been activists since our university days. It is quite unfortunate that he was not lucky. People should not take the law into their hands. We should settle things amicably, I don't know where all these are coming from, but all we are saying is that the government should ensure that they protect lives and properties so that citizens can move around freely.

What are the benefits of the presence of the oil companies in the Niger Delta region?

From the general impression, if you engage these multinationals or companies and ask them why the youths are not employed, they will tell you that the youths are not qualified; they don't have the capacity. So it is an indictment and an irony that for close to 50 years if not more that Nigeria has discovered oil in the Niger Delta region, the people in this region don't have the required skills and capacity to work in these organisations.

Ordinarily, even when you don't have interest in an activity that takes place within your environment within a period of time, you can educate somebody in the process because you have seen how it operates. If you cannot educate somebody, it means you have been shut out of it completely. It is a clear indictment that our people have been shut out from the activities that are taking place in this region. That was basically what caused the crisis and the friction we had in the recent past in the Nigerian state, which brought about the unlawful assassination and murder of Ken Saro Wiwa. That also made them to kill Ijaw sons and daughters, destroy our communities and raped our women.

In their frustration, our boys had no option but to take their destinies in their own hands. These factors later led them into the creeks to fight for the emancipation of the Niger Delta people. Although along the line, criminality came into it. People with dubious and criminal tendencies became part of the struggle. Also in the same group that was fighting for the Niger Delta struggle, they also inflicted pains and sorrows on their people. That is what made the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) to initiate the Amnesty Programme to enable us differentiate those criminals from the actual freedom fighters. And by God's grace, it seems as if we have peace today, but we don't have peace.

Are you saying that the IYC initiated the Amnesty programme?

IYC sent the first proposal to the late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua and was the first group of persons he engaged. But it is not an IYC programme. It is a Niger Delta programme. But we played a critical role in ensuring that our people embraced the amnesty programme. We went into the creeks to engage our boys. We educated them, letting them see the genuineness in the programme; that the government at that time was willing to empower and develop our people. But along the line, against the aims and ideologies that brought about the amnesty initiative, contractors and criminals latched onto the programme and deviated from its main objectives.

The Amnesty programme was meant to enable the government have unrestricted access to the Niger Delta territory; for the companies to go back and do their businesses while we disarmed the boys, rehabilitate and reintegrate them into the society. They are to train not only the boys but the Niger Delta youths in oil and gas activities and make the Niger Delta region an industrial hub. But till date, it is far from reality. People are laying emphasis on payment to militants rather than talk about the crux of the matter, which is the underdevelopment of the region, the pollution of our environment and the degradation of our ecosystem.

We have lost the aquatic life and our people are predominantly fishermen. They settle along the coastal lines. But today, they can no longer do their ancestral business. Now if you want to do the traditional fishing business, you have to go deep offshore. There are special vessels and boats that can access the area. So, they cannot go with their small canoes. These are poor people, so what do you expect them to do? Today, how many persons from Niger Delta own an oil bloc and how many oil blocs do we have? They say we don't have the capacity, but we ask ourselves: the people who manage these oil blocs, were they originally born with that capacity?

If we trace their history, what was the financial state of their families? Some of them went to school on scholarship; some of them were the first persons in their families to see light. So, where did they work? Where did they make the initial money that enabled them buy these oil blocs and other privileges today that have empowered them? They cannot consciously create that enabling environment without capacity so that they will know that the government meant well for them. Ordinarily, we shouldn't have been able, but the government made sure that we have that capacity. Why can't they give us these oil blocs, group communities together and ask them to nominate a head and give them oil blocs to manage by themselves?

But some of the Federal government programmes have somehow impacted positively on the region...

All the programmes of government have failed because any initiative that is based on a faulty foundation can never stand. The government in itself wasn't sincere in developing the Niger Delta. It was a delay tactics; a means to buy time to re-combat and destroy the people that rose against government. And they needed time because the agitation took them unaware. In every state today, when the state government gives out scholarship, it is those people that work around the government and have been empowered that embezzle the contract and carry out substandard projects. They are the ones that will still send their brothers and sisters on these scholarships.

Some of the programmes dwell so much on parochial party sentiment. Because you are not my party member, you will not benefit, instead of us to know that after election, the next thing is governance. Governance has to do with everybody, but they ensure you do not benefit because you never supported them. That is why we are emphasising that corruption is endemic; it is the bane of the crisis we are having today. If you can achieve justice, nobody will struggle for some of these appointments and elections.

Today, people see partisan politics as a form of employment and engagement. Someone who had not worked before handles a responsibility in government and within the twinkle of an eye, he becomes a billionaire. It has also affected the family front. If today you are appointed in government and you said you want to do the right thing, your family will tell you that you are the evil spirit that has been holding the family back. So the Amnesty programme, after it was initiated, the people that drove the initial process were not sincere. They used that means to siphon money from the government as currently being done in the North East of the country with Boko Haram.

During the former President Jonathan's administration, different consultants were brought in to negotiate and mediate with the Boko Haram. People were using it, knowing too well that they were not dealing with the real Boko Haram. They were using the medium to milk the nation. Not until Boko Haram came out that they had not had any negotiation with anybody. These people were just there to ensure that the government did not succeed. There is this saying that when the head is faulty, every other part goes down. So, if you cannot fire, do not hire.

The government at that time never wanted this thing to succeed. They were looking at only one perspective. If they were looking at the broader perspective, which is to ensure that there is peace, because government spends so much money in search of peace instead of justice, which is free and

because government spends so much money in search of peace instead of justice, which is free and cheap. Look at the East-West Road; it is yet to be completed. They have not done anything in the Niger Delta Region. They have not cleansed the region. Even businesses have not stabilised.

Now, strategically, there is a plan to take the Niger Delta economic value down to the South West, and I challenge everyone that cares to listen that if they fail to listen to our plea and go ahead to relocate the NLNG dry-dock shipyard to Badagry, all the investments going on in Badagry naturally will render all the ports in the Niger Delta redundant. We asked the question if the federal government has been benefiting from taxation alone, you will see that they would not have allowed any investment or opportunity to lay fallow because they want to maximize tax.

Why is the Warri port not working? Same with Calabar Port and Port Harcourt Port? Rather, you will hear that there are cargoes waiting for turns to enter into Tin Can Island for clearance. So, they don't want businesses to thrive here. NLNG was talking about insecurity as an excuse. There are issue of kidnapping, robbery and all that in Lagos. So there is insecurity everywhere. How can there be security when there is huge poverty? A popular musician sang that everywhere she has gone to, the only thing that is common to all humans is the act of love. But everywhere I've gone to in this country the common thing I see is poverty. The poverty here is the same poverty in the South West, South East, North and everywhere.

Is Ijaws also judging the recent appointments made by President Buhari?

I cannot judge him on the recent appointments. We know that a lot have gone right and also gone wrong. Definitely, he has to study the process. He has to start from where others stopped, make amends and probably initiate new ideas and policies. So it will be too early for me to pass judgment. But I know that as a military man who has gone through regimentation, he should be disciplined. He should bring in sanity.

Looking at the time of independence till now what difference does it make to the people of the region in terms of development?

The Niger Delta region has not felt any better at all compared with other oil producing nations of the world. Look at Gaddafi of Libya, he was bad but he also tried. Look at other countries where they produce oil and come to the Niger Delta; it is an indictment. It is a shame to the federal government. In America, if you are going to Houston, you know it is oil and steel; if you are going to Florida you know it is finance; different cities with their investments. The Niger Delta should be known as region for oil and gas; a region where any company that takes oil here cannot be so confident to keep her national headquarters here. But you will see this company using chopper. This company will fly you to Warri and from Warri to Lagos which is an hour, because they are comfortable with it. They believe that it enhances their internally generated revenue (IGR).

For Shell, their procurement, human resources, finance departments and managing director's office are all in Lagos. How can there be development here? So, all other subsidiaries rush to Lagos to establish their offices so that they can have access to the procurement department, finance, human resources and the managing director's office. That is why every other company goes there. If you want to travel out of this country, you have to go to Lagos. Why can't we have international flight in Port Harcourt, considering the oil and gas in the region? The only thing we have is a connecting flight to Lagos then to America or from Port Harcourt to Abuja. So, these are the challenges we have.

The companies are not being fair to the Niger Delta people. If an environment has huge resources and the people are excessively quiet, know that they are just waiting for the perfect moment because naturally, where there is injustice, the people revolt. So if you feel that they have been conquered, they have not been conquered. If we will still remain as one Nigeria, the government should ensure that there is peace in every region.

Is it true that there is a change in the struggle?

IYC, as the touch bearers, are against violence. Because we want all the citizens to participate and benefit, we want everybody to be alive. We are willing to engage and we have been engaging. But when peaceful dialogue becomes difficult, violence becomes inevitable. Everybody, no matter how quiet the person is, has a certain degree or percentage of violence in him or her. That is what makes the person human. Now the question is what is capable of pulling out that violent aspect of you? There is a limit to what people can take. They can endure but they will not endure all the time.

We have decided to embrace peace and dialogue, but do you know if our children will apply that method? We have believed that engagement, discussion is appropriate. Isaac Adaka Boro felt that those peaceful engagements have delayed and denied the justice we are fighting for and he took arms against the Nigerian state. Ken Saro Wiwa came again and said let us further engage and he was

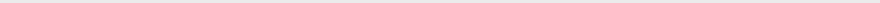
brutally murdered. Asari Dokubo, Tompolo, Fara Dagogo, Egbere Papa and others felt that let us face our greatest challenge. The same blood that flows in them also flows in us. We have dialogued over this time past and yet they have refused to listen. We the leaders are still dialoguing, but we don't know the next set of leaders that will take over from us. We will not remain here as leaders forever. Our

tenure as leaders is time bound. The people that will take over, we don't know if they will apply our method.

Considering the fact that you have a family, how are you coping with the struggle and family?

Well, it has always been a challenge and I thank God for my wife. Before we got married, she knew I was a strong activist, although she is a very strong Christian. It was an irony to a lot of people how someone so spiritual got married to an activist. But she said why she married me was because she was led and felt that she had a role to play in my life and I also have a role to play in her life.

You know when you don't involve yourself in shady deeds, you will always have some level of peace. I am a free person moving around without any fear. But I now realized that if you are good, there are still some people that will not like you. So you need to apply extra security measures. But all I know is that God is the only one that can protect us.



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