

# MILLS OF SORROW

## Sad end, tales of Taraku Mills' ex-workers

From Linus Oota, Lafia

1 THE late Aguma Stephen Kon was a native of Mbamaa village, Mbakyaan council ward of Gwer Local Government Area of Benue State. Until his death in January, he was a staff in the administrative department of Taraku Mills Nigerian Limited owned by the state government. Employed in 1991, he was among the 377 staff of the now moribund company disengaged in 2009 without payment of any entitlement. Before then, he was owed salary for six years.

With two wives and nine children to cater for, he had no dime to seek medical help for the over six years he was sick till early this year when he lost the battle for survival.

2 Like Kon, Tsenongo Asongo, an indigene of Howe village in Uge ward of the same local council was engaged as security personnel in

1993. The last time he received his salary was in February 2003. He died of stroke in November, last year, after being bedridden without medical attention, leaving behind a wife and six children.

3 Targba Kwasegh, another staff employed in 1994 was also owed salary since 2003, till he died in May, last year. Kon, Asongo and Kwasegh, are not the only staff of the company owed salary for almost seven years before their abrupt disengagement without payment. About 377 staff of the company are said to have suffered same fate, out of which 60 are dead.

The company located along Makurdi/Enugu road, in Taraku, Gwer Local Government Area, was established in 1982 by the first civilian governor of the state, late Aper Aku. It was reputed to be one of the nation's modern integrated veg-

etable oil processing plants established at a cost of about 56million pound sterling. It had an installed capacity of processing 72,000 tons of soya beans into vegetable oil and soya meal; 120,000 tons of maize into flour, brewers' grits as well as 72,300 tones of animal feeds and feed concentrates, per annum. At its peak, the company's products won national and international acclaim for high quality.

With an assets base in excess of N4 billion, the company was once a viable venture that returned profit on investment within a short period of time, and had a capacity to absorb a workforce of over 7,000 skilled and unskilled persons. Centrally located at Taraku, a distance of four kilometres to Otukpo, the traditional headquarters of the Idomas, the company which commenced full operations in 1989,

was meant to serve the three dominant ethnic groups in the state before the creation of Kogi.

It was also envisaged that the proximity of the site to a railway station coupled with the large expanse of land at its disposal, would encourage farmers to grow soya beans and beniseed in commercial quantity to meet its raw material needs.

Ironically, while the late Aper Aku had a lofty vision in establishing the company, which included development of the state's agricultural and natural resources to a veritable source of internal revenue, successive administrations turned a blind eye and left the company, said to be the largest of its kind in West Africa, to go comatose.

It was learnt that between 1999 and 2007,

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