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Jos mayhem: Matters arising

THE recent violent crisis that trailed the Thursday, November 27, 2008 local government election in Jos, Plateau state capital, condemnable as it were, has, once again, stirred the contentions issue of the 'host'/'settler' dichotomy that apparently threatens the country's quest for a stable and prosperous polity as well as economic advancement.

By the time the dust settled in the Tin City, more than 500 people were reportedly killed, while several thousands, most of them wounded or permanently incapacitated were displaced as they were forced to seek refuge at designated 'safe havens.' Similarly, several homes and business premises, including school buildings and worship places were wantonly destroyed while the avoidable crisis lasted.

The immediate cause of the mayhem was, we strongly believe, the insensitive, nay, incompetent conduct of the local government elections, particularly that of the Jos North by the Plateau state Independent Electoral Commission (PLASIEC). Although the electoral process started and was conducted fairly, peacefully, problem started when the state electoral umpire, under the directive of its chairman, Mr. Gabriel Zi decided to change the venue for the collation of election results.

Consequently, the State Independent Electoral Commission's refusal to collate the votes cast at the Jos North local government secretariat was seen as calculated move to rig the election, resulting in the opposition parties in the state, notably the ANPP, taking to the streets in protest over this brazen daylight electoral robbery.

Our worry is on the fact that the state government cannot be absolved of complicity with the PLASIEC in its determination to win the coveted Jos North chairmanship election at all cost. That the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)-controlled government, led by David Jonah Jang, connived with the electoral body to rig the controversial local government polls was not debatable. Moreover, Governor Jang's anxiety to swear-in those contestants that were declared as 'winners' of the controversial election, even when the state capital was burning and scores being killed and displaced, smacked of sheer irresponsibility on the part of the authorities.

But while the surreptitious attempt by the state electoral body to rig the polls in favour of the ruling PDP in the state is seen as the immediate cause of the avoidable carnage in Jos North particularly, the remote cause of the crisis could be traced to the obnoxious, unconstitutional concept of 'settler' versus 'host' community dichotomy. This contentious issue, anachronistic as it is, has always been the major factor in communal clashes that ultimately leads to violent confrontations between the Hausa settler communities and host indigenous inhabitants.

Daily Triumph, like any other sane individual in the country therefore, condemns in totality, Plateau authorities' ineptitude and seeming inability to control the crisis before it worsened. As the chief security officer in the state, we expected Governor Jang to act neutral while allowing PLASIEC to discharge its constitutional mandate. But rather than call the electoral umpire to order by prevailing on it to announce the results in Jos North local government secretariat as was the case in previous elections, the governor visibly aided and abetted the election rigging and even encouraged the commission to hastily declare the winners. We believe no sane individual, talkless of an executive governor worthy of respect, could dare announce the results of the controversial election, or even direct the swearing-in of the said winner(s) at a time when his larger constituency was enmeshed in a violent crisis with several people, including women and school children, being brutally murdered.

While we commend the federal government for the prompt response with which it confronted the Jos crisis through rapid deployment of federal troops, it is equally heart-warming to note the federal government's concern towards the humanitarian crisis as evidenced by the relief materials it distributed to the victims. But much more need to be done in the area of providing succour to the disoriented victims, most of whom have taken refuge at the Army barracks, churches and mosques in the city.

But even though it is imperative to call on government at all levels, including individuals and corporate organizations to wake up to the challenges of rehabilitating the displaced victims of the unfortunate Jos crisis, we equally make bold to prevail upon the federal government to carefully and meticulously investigate both the remote and immediate causes of the political-turned religious crisis with a view to fishing out the culprits and making them face the wrath of the law. It is our belief that only a very stern and drastic measure taken against the perpetrators of this violent orgy can really serve as deterrent against future occurrence.

Though we commend President Umaru Musa Yar'adua's handling of the Jos crisis also, we advocate, without mincing words, for the declaration of state of emergency in Plateau state as a prelude to conducting a comprehensive investigation into the crisis to ascertain whether the state government did, in fact, connive with PLASIEC to rig the local government election. With the accused governor in power, not much could be

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achieved regarding the governor's direct or indirect involvement in the controversy that led to the mayhem.

To state the truth, naked as it is, Governor Jang has woefully compromised his position as the chief security officer of Plateau state by failing to protect the lives of his citizens and their property. By openly conspiring with the state electoral commission to manipulate elections results, the governor, insensitive as he proved, has jeopardized the fragile peace, economic prosperity and political stability of the state and should therefore be made to pay the price.

We, therefore, urge the various committees established by both the federal government and its legislative arm to investigate the genocide and, any group or individual found to have played any despicable role in the crisis, should be deservedly punished.

Ultimately, however, the lasting solutions to such ignoble episodes can only be achieved when our politicians and relevant authorities take it upon themselves to defend the legal and constitutional rights of all citizens. Since the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has made it explicitly clear that any Nigerian of whatever social, cultural or religious background is entitled to vote and be voted for, the obnoxious but xenophobic 'settler'/'host' mentality as perceived by some unpatrotic few should be strongly condemned and discouraged out as the concept is egoistic unconstitutional and therefore, null and void.