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An Independent Press Working Against Famine: the Nigerian Experience

by Sanjay Reddy, *Student at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

The proposition that an independent press can play an extremely positive rôle in focusing attention on, and directing a response to, a food-crisis situation has been put forth by Amartya Sen, who has attempted to explain differential successes in preventing famines partly on this basis,¹ supported convincingly in the Indian context by N. Ram,² editor of the influential newspaper, *The Hindu* (Madras). As a contribution to the evidence in favour of this proposition, and its relevance to Africa, this article examines the contribution made by one newspaper during 1973-4 in mediating the public and governmental response to the famine which struck the north of Nigeria.

During that nation's period of military rule which began in 1966, the *Daily Times*, published in Lagos since 1926, was probably black Africa's widest circulated and most profitable newspaper.³ This oldest surviving national daily had the most ethnically varied readership in Nigeria,⁴ with the greatest sales in each of the regions (except during the Biafran war of attempted secession), which is not surprising in view of the fact that it was often described as 'innovative', 'ever crusading', and 'independent'.

The *Daily Times*, according to John Annamaleze, 'has over a long period championed the greater enlightenment of the Nigerian people and thus has earned the reputation of being the bedrock and training ground of Nigerian journalists.'⁵ During the early 1970s this privately owned newspaper - in fact, controlled by British interests, though run entirely by Nigerians - can be said to have had an uncommitted editorial policy, albeit in moderate concurrence with many of the policies of the Federal Military Government (F.M.G.). It is important to note, however, that during this period a number of journalists were on occasion subjected to official harassment and arrest.⁶

Despite the military régime's considerable sensitivity to press criticism, not to mention some extreme cases of confrontation and repression, it should be stressed that there were no formal and few, if any, informal mechanisms of control. The F.M.G., headed by General Yakubu Gowon from 1966 to 1975, did not suspend the constitutional guarantees and provisions relating to the freedom of the press, and in fact officially encouraged the expression of diverse opinions. According to Alhaji Babatunde Jose, the chairman and managing director of the *Daily Times*:

In Nigeria, although we have since January 1966 been governed by the armed forces and the country has been under a state of emergency, there has never been press censorship... what exists

¹ Amartya K. Sen, 'Food Battles: conflicts in the access to food', the Coromandel Lecture delivered in New Delhi, 13 December 1982.

² N. Ram, 'An Independent Press and Anti-Hunger Strategies', Conference on Food Strategies, World Institute for Development Economics and Research, Helsinki, 21-25 July 1986.

³ Frank Okwu Ugboajah, *Communication Policies in Nigeria* (Paris, 1980), p. 18.

⁴ Marcia A. Grant, 'Nigerian Newspaper Types', in *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies* (London), 11, July 1972, pp. 95-113.

⁵ John Annamaleze Jr., *The Nigerian Press: the people's conscience?* (New York, 1979), p. 31.

⁶ *Daily Times* (Lagos), 6 and 7 September 1973.

is self-inhibition and self-censorship. Last month [September 1974], all the newspapers, government and private, launched a sustained campaign against a state military governor, whose uniformed guards manhandled a reporter. I do not know of any country in the world under military rule or any other civilian dictatorship, where the press can be so critical of highly placed government officials as the Nigerian press and get away with it most of the time.¹

Indeed, some local newspapers published comments that were probably as bitter and critical of government actions as those to be found anywhere else in the world.

Although there was no formal framework for governmental responsiveness to public opinion in Gowon's Nigeria – as in earlier and later civilian régimes – the F.M.G. was both conscious of and concerned about public attitudes. This is apparent from the tone of the frequent public appeals, comments, and speeches of the various military governors and their officials as reported in the *Daily Times*, especially in the open debates over the November 1973 census,² as well as the return to civilian rule targeted for 1976.

The mutually reinforcing anti-hunger rôles of India's official opposition and its independent press have been explored by Ram.³ While political parties, useful in *forcing* a response from those in authority, were obviously lacking in Nigeria during this era, there was a continuing bureaucratic consciousness of public opinion and a natural administrative tendency in favour of a response, as alluded to above. In other words, despite the absence of well-enforced constitutional safeguards there was enough scope for newspaper criticisms and government reactions to give plausibility to Amartya Sen's hypothesis on famines and an independent press.



The Nigerian famine now being analysed was substantially the result of the larger Sahelian and West African drought which peaked in the years 1972–4, although the origins of the food crisis are earlier, because some regions were seriously affected during 1969.⁴

The first unusually serious and widespread effects of the drought occurred during the 1972–3 season, when food and cash crops failed, especially in northern Sokoto, Borno, Kano, and Kaduna, where some areas were also hit by concomitant outbreaks of locusts. The resulting household shortages were apparent in many markets by early 1973, when the prices of food rose quickly and substantially, while those for livestock collapsed entirely.⁵ Many had

¹ *Daily Times*, 24 October 1974, p. 7.

² Cf. Ian Campbell, 'The Nigerian Census: an essay in civil-military relations' in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (London), 14, 3, November 1976, pp. 242–54.

³ Ram, *op. cit.*

⁴ Jonathan Derrick, 'The Great West African Drought, 1972–1974, in *African Affairs* (London), 76, 305, October 1977, pp. 537–82. It should be noted that Nigeria is seldom included in studies of this drought because it is not a member of the *Comité permanent interétats de lutte contre la sécheresse dans le Sahel*, and the F.M.G. neither solicited overseas aid nor encouraged external recognition of its problem. However, the affected areas of northern Nigeria contain as large a population as do the members of the C.I.L.S.S., and are hence surely deserving of attention.

⁵ G. J. van Apeldoorn, *Perspectives on Drought and Famine in Nigeria* (London, 1981), pp. 42 and 46.

already exhausted their carry-over stocks,¹ and inevitably personal possessions, such as kitchen utensils and clothes, began to be sold. Indeed, 'right from October 1972, some victims had no defence other than to migrate'.²

There was little general awareness in the rest of Nigeria of either the nature or extent of the problem, and throughout 1972-3 'only isolated reports in the national dailies... indicated that the situation in each of the four states was serious'.³ However, the F.M.G., alerted early by their federal agricultural staff, sanctioned ₦10 million to the involved states for relief assistance in the form of the subsidised sale and distribution of food, seed, and livestock feed, although only half of this special subvention could be spent prior to May 1973.⁴ As the states were essentially dependent on the federal authorities for such relief funds, it is certainly reasonable to conclude that these were not sufficient to ameliorate the dire circumstances of the poverty-stricken northerners.⁵

Judging by the notable lack of relief-targeted funds in its 1973-74 budget, the F.M.G. did not expect the drought to continue. Unfortunately, despite the severity of the losses suffered during 1972-3 by farmers and pastoralists, there followed a drought and food crisis (essentially the same in pattern and nature) which represented a new nadir, not least because the failures which had previously affected the most marginal sectors were now encountered by a much larger proportion of the population. However, during the 1973-4 season there was far greater public awareness of, and concern with, the effects of the drought, and hence our interest in any pressures that may have had a bearing on governmental responses during this period.

Throughout June 1973 there was not one noteworthy mention in the *Daily Times* of the deteriorating situation in the North. During the next two months there were a few acknowledgements of the failure of rains in the new crop season,⁶ but it was not until 1 September that the newspaper published its first article on the drought, which is significant for the insights offered into aspects of the anti-famine rôle which would later develop fully. As Marcia Grant has noted:

Nigerian news reports can be divided into two kinds: what people say about events, and reports about the events themselves... the newspapers with the highest circulations, the *Times*, *Post*, and *Express*, were full of the first type of story and by this device avoided direct reporting of the events themselves.⁷

The story in question, entitled 'Governor Is Angry Over Census Funds', quoted Governor Usman of the North-East State on the 'devastating' effects

¹ A. R. James, 'Drought Conditions in the Pressure Water Zone of North-Eastern Nigeria: some provisional observations', in *Savanna* (Zaria), 2, 2, 1973, pp. 108-14.

² van Apeldoorn, op. cit. p. 46.

³ *Ibid.* p. 44.

⁴ *West Africa* (London), 6 August 1973.

⁵ See Derrick, loc. cit. and van Apeldoorn, op. cit. p. 45.

⁶ In August and September 1973, before the *Daily Times* had realised the seriousness of the situation, the *New Nigerian* (Kaduna) was already pushing the Federal Military Government to release more funds to deal with the drought - see Derrick, loc. cit. and van Apeldoorn, op. cit. p. 53. In fact, throughout the crisis, the *New Nigerian* appears to have been far more liberal (at times vitriolic) in its criticism of the authorities than the *Daily Times*, albeit eclipsed nationally when the Lagos newspaper began its own campaign on the issue.

⁷ Grant, loc. cit.

of the drought in his region, and called for further assistance from the F.M.G., noting that earlier grants had been 'fully utilised'. As most of the relief work being carried out by the states was dependent on federal funds, public attention focussed increasingly on the potential transfer of more monies from the centre to what might be called the periphery. Thus, the Nigerian press had the opportunity to help not only in creating public pressures on the F.M.G. – to the extent that this was possible under military rule – but also in mediating between the demanding states and the sometimes reluctant federal authorities.¹

The coverage of the growing crisis in the North by the *Daily Times* was still rather thin throughout September 1973, but included inner-page articles on drought-related influxes as a source of the fast-rising food prices in Kaduna, one quoting the Commissioner of Kano State on the need for further action by the F.M.G., another being entitled 'Locust, The Enemy, Has Done Its Worst'.² Only perfunctory notice was taken of General Gowon's national day address, in which he announced that the F.M.G. would provide an extra ₦12 million in anti-drought funds to the states: ₦2 million for the construction of grain stores, and ₦10 million in interest-free loans.³ It was only towards the end of October, as the *New Nigerian* claimed, 'that the full extent of this year's widespread lateness and shortage of rains is beginning to sink in'.⁴ A few days later, in its first front-page treatment of the worsening situation, headed 'Villagers Flee From Drought',⁵ the *Daily Times*, seemingly quite abruptly, launched the intense coverage of the famine which would characterise its pages for the next two months.

It should be noted, however, that some of the state governments had much earlier become concerned about the effect of large drought-related migrations on the forthcoming census.⁶ We can conclude that, at least in the case of the *Daily Times*, there was no notable 'early-warning' rôle, of the type referred to by Ram as one of the major anti-hunger functions on the Indian press.⁷ In Nigeria, as a matter of fact, governmental awareness of the impending problem seems to have largely preceded the press and national consciousness. The area in which the Lagos-based newspaper would now distinguish itself was in enlarging that consciousness, and hence in expanding the scope of remedial action.

During the first 10 days of November, five major stories appeared in the *Daily Times*, including two with front-page headlines, focussed on rising food prices in the North, the dangers to the census in drought-related migrations, and famine deaths in Kano and North-Central States, with titles like: 'Bako Cries Out: My State Is Suffering', and 'Drought Disaster Latest: Many Lives Wiped Out'. Officials from the most affected states were reported to have called for immediate federal assistance, Bako being quoted as follows: 'This is the time we can put into practice all our widely publicised inter-state

¹ Such a feature of the drought coverage was apparent throughout. The controversy over the 1973 census as detailed by Campbell, loc. cit. may be regarded as a further example of the power struggle between the Nigerian states and the centre.

² *Daily Times*, 6, 22, and 29 September 1973.

⁴ *New Nigerian*, 25 October 1973.

⁶ van Apeldoorn, op. cit. p. 53.

³ *Ibid.* 1 October 1973.

⁵ *Daily Times*, 29 October 1973.

⁷ Ram, op. cit.

cooperation. My state is suffering and my people are dying. I need help from all of you who are our friends.'¹ On 12 November a national emergency relief fund for the drought-stricken states was launched by the *Daily Times* under a bold, inverse typeface that read: 'FELLOW COUNTRYMEN PLEASE – S-O-S':

The truth is that with, and in spite of, government efforts, there is not enough food to go round and these our fellow countrymen have not got the money to buy the subsidized food... their suffering should be on the conscience of every other Nigerian.

... [Northerners] may die of hunger in a proverbial country of plenty where no man should die of starvation... we should not allow international relief organisations to come and do what we should and are able to do for ourselves and get the credit for spending one quarter of whatever they collect from foreign governments on food and seventy-five percent on administrative expenses.

There was an immediate response to this appeal, with ₦13,900 being received on the first day, followed by two months of almost daily publicity about either the growth of the fund and/or the drought itself. The managing director of the *Daily Times*, Alhaji Jose, staked his own prestige on the success of this venture by making personal comments and emotional appeals regularly on the pages of his newspaper, and by heartily thanking all donors. Other coverage included reprints of the initial appeal, and frequent first or second-page illustrated features, with such headings as 'The Drought: What a Great Misfortune!', 'The Drought: a National Disaster', or 'Drought Shocker!'. Sometimes stirring photographs were accompanied by prose such as this:

Tomorrow may be too late...

Cry havoc... wherever you live in this country, you are affected by and should be concerned with the drought disaster...

If these children are left to die, the whole nation would be left to die. And that means all of us – not only those in authority. For we all know their plight and owe it a duty to help them.

The last sentence implicitly acknowledged that the *Daily Times* was being instrumental in satisfying one of the prerequisites of a moral necessity to help the helpless, 'For we all know their plight'. It is clear from the size, number, and types of donations collected – not only from various major corporations, schools, and religious institutions, but also from hundreds of individuals in both the private and public sectors (for example, a group of civil servants donated 5 per cent of their payroll for a certain period) – that the National Drought Relief Fund, founded, publicised, and organised under the auspices of the *Daily Times*, was by far the most significant private drought-relief undertaking within Nigeria.²

Throughout November the newspaper continued its campaign with an intense coverage of the drought and, increasingly, the famine. Various faces of the disaster were presented, including the associated rises in food prices throughout Nigeria, the relief and disease-prevention measures being undertaken in the states, the drought-related influx of locusts and the absence of remedial governmental action, as well as the difficulties in tax collection, especially in the areas stricken by famine.³ The *Daily Times* campaigned

¹ *Daily Times*, 1, 5, 6, 9, and 10 November 1973.

² Derrick, loc. cit. and van Apeldoorn, op. cit. p. 54.

³ *Daily Times*, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26, 28, and 29 November 1973.

against the continued collection of community and cattle taxes by insistently enquiring of officials whether or not they would soon be waived, and by reporting the comments of local leaders and farmers who were opposed to them.¹ The severity of the drought was made more widely known by human-interest reports of bulls being slaughtered to appease the gods, of a farmer harvesting one bag of groundnuts as against his usual 80, and of families destroying anthills in order to get the grains that might be stored inside.² It is hardly surprising that by the middle of this month the F.M.G. announced ₹10 million in new grants and loans to the states for acquisition of grains and storage facilities.³

However, the situation in many areas worsened during December. It was reported that officials were increasingly realising that a very large number of farmers lacked the money to buy even the heavily subsidised food; and on the same day and page, the *Daily Times* editorial claimed that the new immunisation programme in the drought-affected areas 'ought to have been embarked upon much earlier than now'.⁴ As regards the planned research panels and ministerial study groups:

it will be wiser and more rational to set aside the usual bible of the civil service otherwise known as General Orders. We say this because the situation seems to us a life and death matter. This vital programme which is already so late MUST not be delayed much further.⁵

This language was stronger than that used in other editorials at this time. The stress on the need for urgency was particularly relevant in light of the fact that much of the Government's attention seemed to be preoccupied with projects of longer-term importance, including a 'nutrition course', 'livestock breeding', and a 'wheat cultivation scheme'.⁶ On 7 December 1973, General Gowon departed on a highly publicised six-day tour of the most affected areas,⁷ where he revealed a 'Big Plan to Import Food'.⁸ On Christmas Day he announced the largest federal assistance yet: an increase in the year's F.M.G.'s relief budget to ₹30 million, a decision that was applauded enthusiastically by the *Daily Times*.⁹

As public awareness of the drought grew, and as a deeper interest emerged in causes and solutions, a larger proportion of the newspaper's coverage became analytical rather than reportorial in character. At least nine full pages were devoted during this period to articles by commentators who offered far more (and generally reasonable and valid) prescriptions and criticisms than had any others previously. However, at times they betrayed some misunderstanding of causes and a propensity towards instant economics and ecology (of the type detailed by Ram),¹⁰ as in 'Combatting the Drought Effect', which emphasised the proposition that 'The sahara desert is fast extending southwards'. Other features included 'Drought and Food Prices', a series on the north-eastern outbreaks of locusts and the reasons for their association with

¹ Ibid. 10 December 1973.

³ Ibid. 17 November 1973.

⁵ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. 7 December 1973.

⁹ Ibid. 25 December 1973.

² Ibid. 24 and 28 November 1973.

⁴ Ibid. 3 December 1973.

⁶ Ibid. 6 November, 7 and 11 December 1973.

⁸ Ibid. 10 December 1973.

¹⁰ Ram, op. cit. p. 52.

the drought, and 'Drought Disaster: a Nation in Dilemma'.¹ 'The Lessons We Must Learn' by the editor of the *Daily Times*, Areoye Oyebola, included the following hard words and advice:

the government must take greater and more realistic interest in the plight of our farmers... I saw grinding poverty. I saw the wretchedness of millions of our people. The people who, in spite of their wretchedness, still subsidize the prices of the food in our cities - millet, beans, groundnuts... it is one thing to construct makeshift roads and hurriedly distribute relief measures in order to impress an august visitor [General Gowon]: it is another to take greater and sustained interest in our neglected and suffering rural population... financial assistance to the states must be spent on the problem of drought and not on prestige projects... this danger is real... there was some considerable evidence of window dressing [in drought relief].²

Some of these criticisms clearly showed that the *Daily Times* had a better understanding of the problem than many public servants. On 25 December, the newspaper called upon the F.M.G. to take over direct relief operations from the states because they lacked the necessary resources and organisation for this emergency work, and in January 1974 it advocated that the army's help should be enlisted.³ Indeed, it would later be widely agreed that the logistical and organisational constraints on the states were the greatest obstacles to a successful relief effort.⁴

It is clear that the *Daily Times* became highly conscious of the importance of its rôle in combating the effects of the drought, and that this was acknowledged both by the public and by key government officials.⁵ As claimed by Haroun Adamu, the newspaper's political editor:

The press in this country can count as one of its major successes, the awakening of Nigerians, especially those in authority, to their responsibility to a section of this country, which is going through an agonising experience of slow and inevitable death through hunger.⁶

The claim that the *Daily Times* did, in fact, largely deserve the credit for this awakening is supported by the large number of compliments to that effect which it published (rather shamelessly). An example is this statement by the chairman of the New Nigeria Development Corporation, Malam Ahmed Talib:

The *Daily Times* of Nigeria, by sending its correspondents to the areas affected for on-the-spot assessment of the gravity of the situation has helped to bring the seriousness of the situation to the attention of the nation... the *Daily Times* has thus abundantly demonstrated its awareness of its responsibility.⁷

The newspaper also collected thanks from various influential leaders, including Governor Audu Bako of Kano State, Brigadier Abba Kyari of the North-Central State, the Permanent Secretary of the Kano Ministry of Agriculture, the Shehu of Borno, and the Emir of Gummel.⁸ Most of them praised the *Daily*

¹ *Daily Times*, 1, 8, 10, and 14 December 1973.

² *Ibid.* 17 December 1973.

³ *Ibid.* 25 December 1973 and January 1974.

⁴ van Apeldoorn, *op. cit.* p. 65.

⁵ Cf. the call by Ram, *op. cit.* pp. 65 and 70, for the anti-hunger rôle of the Indian press to be enhanced by 'an active consciousness, a coherent theory of its own role in relation to society', and 'public advocacy of its role as a vital part of the striving for a democratic, just society'.

⁶ *Daily Times*, December 1973.

⁷ *Ibid.* 6 December 1973.

⁸ *Ibid.* 23 November, 5 and 10 December 1973, and 16 January 1974.

Times for its 'humanitarianism' and 'social consciousness', and for its rôle in having made Nigerians aware of the drought, as well as setting an example of national unity which transcended regional boundaries. Perhaps the most explicit was the Governor of Kano, who 'expressed the gratitude of the government as well as his people to Alhaji Jose for alerting the people to the plight of the drought victims'.¹ Bako had clearly recognised, as early as November 1973, that press coverage could prove useful in convincing the general public and, especially, the F.M.G. of the seriousness of the problem, and hence he had organised a special tour of the drought areas to 'enable members of the press to possess an objective and thoroughly comprehensive insight and be better placed to produce a more vivid report of the sufferings of fellow Nigerians.'²

Though happy to receive praise for its coverage of the drought, the *Daily Times* was a little uncomfortable with its rôle of publicist and manager of the relief fund. Alhaji Jose repeatedly insisted that the newspaper would not earn a premium on contributions, that the appeal had not boosted its own circulation figures, and that 'the company was not making any charge on the fund in respect of advertising space or cost of his own travels'.³ Clearly some doubts existed among readers as to the organisation of the relief fund, which is hardly surprising since such a newspaper venture was new enough in the Nigerian context to arouse interest about its mechanics and integrity. The anti-drought efforts of the *Daily Times* were thus not just an expected and ordinary consequence of living up to its 'ever-crusading' epithet, but reflected unusual originality and vigour.

January 1974 was marked by a steadily decreasing coverage of drought issues. In a controversial article entitled 'The Way Out', Jose strongly called for the assistance of soldiers in the distribution of relief materials, in order to circumvent the limitations of the state governments.⁴ The newspaper continued to solicit contributions for the relief fund in the following months, albeit less vigorously and less often than before, despite the fact that hardships continued in some areas until the next harvest, and for some farmers for even longer.⁵

Conclusions

There is evidence that the *Daily Times* played an important rôle in helping to combat the 1973-4 famine in northern Nigeria, especially by its sustained appeal for information and funds in November and December 1973. Of special interest is the fact that this Lagos publication's campaign occurred during a period of military rule in which no formal channels existed for any organised opposition to the régime's policies or actions, and that it was able to mediate helpfully as much between levels of government as between the latter and the people. Although the relief and rehabilitation efforts undertaken by the states in Nigeria - under the direction, and with the assistance, of the federal authorities - were not in the final analysis really adequate,⁶ there is no doubt

¹ Ibid. 16 January 1974.

³ Ibid. 5 and 24 December 1973.

⁵ van Apeldoorn, op. cit. p. 65.

² Ibid. 19 November 1973.

⁴ Ibid. 19 January 1974.

⁶ Ibid. and Derrick, op. cit.

that the rôle played by the *Daily Times* was truly laudable and at least partially effective.

The achievements of this widely read newspaper in Nigeria illustrate the advantages of adding a similar dimension to the fight against famine elsewhere in Africa. The problem is that even accurate reports and responsible comments about any national crisis are often vigorously opposed by the régime concerned on the grounds that these may not only weaken authority but also cause harmful panic and speculation. Although such fears may sometimes be justified, the positive effects of freedom of expression are likely to outweigh the alleged disadvantages, especially if those in power have been motivated to act beneficially in ways that they might not otherwise have taken.

It should be noted that in 1977, during an increasingly constricted climate as regards press freedom, the Federal Government, then headed by General Olusegun Obasanjo, felt that it was necessary to acquire a controlling interest in the two newspapers most distinguished by their coverage of the 1973-4 drought, the *New Nigerian* and the *Daily Times*. Hence the poignancy of the following warning from a reader that had been published at the height of the latter's anti-famine crusade:

The way our journalists are maltreated nowadays makes me to doubt the claim that our press is free. Freedom of the Press should be respected in the interest of all. The Press, among other things, informs the governed of the activities of the Government. It exposes corruption in our society and thus helps to curb it. Through the help of the press, the drought affected areas of the Northern states of the country have received help from many Nigerians. The freedom of the press should, therefore, not be interfered with by those in power.¹

¹ *Daily Times*, 20 December 1973.