

## **Quick Visit to Zimbabwe: My Case for the Rekindling of the Ubuntu Spirit in Africa**

**By**

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At the last minute, I was invited by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), to present my thoughts on situational quadruple nexus (SQN), as it relates to the possibility of the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in Harare, Zimbabwe. It was less than a week before the meeting. I expressed my concerns over securing a visa and was told that should not be a problem since I can apply online. Though I knew what Nigerians go through over visas, I eagerly accepted to share knowledge and learn at the meeting.

I went online for the Zimbabwe e-Visa. There were three categories. Category A countries are those not needing a visa to enter Zimbabwe. They understandably include Southern African neighbours and some other countries like Pacific Island countries, Jamaica, Belize, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana etc. The citizens of countries in category B may travel, but may be required to pay for a visa before entering into Zimbabwe. These include: United States, United Kingdom and a number of other European countries including the Russian Federation, China, Australia, Japan Senegal, Rwanda, Cape Verde, Ethiopia, etc. Nigeria was listed in Category C with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Gambia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Mali, and Morocco etc. These are countries that must pay and receive a visa before leaving home for Zimbabwe.

I felt very bad. I thought Nigeria deserved better treatment from Zimbabwe. I remember clearly that the people of Nigeria, and not the government only, contributed towards the liberation of Zimbabwe in several ways. I remember General Olusegun Obasanjo as military leader decided by fiat to collect a month of my salary as I just began working at the University of Lagos towards the fund from the populace that was put together for the struggles of the freedom fighters against Ian Smith's white minority government that had declared a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) on November 11, 1965 but without recognition. The country the UDI government called Rhodesia was named after Cecil Rhodes the owner of British South Africa Company. That commercial venture like that of the Royal Niger Company that purportedly owned the area now known as Nigeria puts paid to the initial deception of the British that they came on a civilizing mission to Africa. The U.K. assumed formal colonial control in 1923 and opposed the UDI in words but, with several other accomplices, condoned it. This set of countries and others have the category B status that is superior to Nigeria that was known as a Frontline State given her role in restoring the dignity of the African man/woman in Southern Africa.

I remember late Prof. Adebayo Adedeji, once telling me of how he carried brief-cases of cash from the Nigerian government and Siad Barre's Somalia etc., into jungles to seek out Robert G. Mugabe in order to empower the freedom fighters with funds. I remember General Obasanjo nationalizing British Petroleum (which became African Petroleum AP), and the banking interests of the British in Nigeria (Barclays, which became Union Bank and Standard, which became First Bank), in order to force Margaret Thatcher to change her silent support for the UDI government. I remember General Obasanjo telling me about how he solved the differences between Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo by locking the two leaders up in a room at Dodan Barracks, the seat of Nigerian Government leaving them with two loaded pistols and asked them to finish each other or if there is a survivor, he would work with that one on the freedom of Zimbabwe or they use the isolation to resolve their differences and hammer out an agreement. They chose the peace agreement option and jointly faced Ian Smith's White minority and weakened the UDI government and negotiated an agreement and elections that saw Mugabe become Prime Minister at Independence on April 18, 1980. I remember the party we held as graduate students in Los Angeles on the day of Zimbabwe's Independence feeling fulfilled and happy that one more is down leaving apartheid South Africa.

Unfortunately, we have a government that accepts all the ill-treatment Nigerians face around the world without insisting that access to Nigeria for investments, easy trade access and support at international organisations would go with better treatment for Nigerians.

I completed the visa application process online, paid and received receipt of payment with reference number and waited. There was no movement on processing beyond confirmation of submission. My application did not move to the next stage to date. I knew there was a problem. I asked for assistance from UNECA. I was given the WhatsApp number of the Zimbabwe Embassy focal person for the meeting. I established contact but he gave me another number for the desk officer in Harare. This lady was very nice and she told me my case had been escalated to the immigration ministry on the request of UNECA. On Thursday, there was no movement on my application and I was to travel on Friday, February 24, 2023, through South Africa. I made it known that I could only travel on Friday because Saturday would be one of the stupid destabilisations that is foisted on us by focusing on elections every four years when we must have 2 days of no movements like Covid-19 lockdown.

Just before close of business, she sent another form to fill in for a manual process to receive approval to be boarded on a plane for visa on arrival. I complied. As they opened on Friday, I connected with her again. I must say she was calm and pleasant in assuring that she would follow-up as they had just started work. By about 14:00, my visa on arrival paper came and I had to start rushing to pack for the airport. In the process, I forgot the only daily medicine I take but had everything else.

South African Airways travels from the new Terminal 2 of Murtala Muhammed International Airport (MMIA), that was built with a lot of in-built corruption that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) has been dancing around on with respect to getting restitutions for a people who are not poor but rendered the poor by the autocratic kleptocracy that pretends to be a democracy. I laugh when people write about how technology will solve the problem of

corruption in Nigeria. This is a huge joke because we know the people involved but our Attorney-General files *nolle prosequi* or our President grants reprieve to those already convicted aside from welcoming on board all sorts of corrupt misleaders who join the ruling party.

However, I was pleased with the environment of Terminal 2. The SAA lounge was located in Terminal 1 and I decided to undertake the long walk across since I would not go through security again. Moving from Terminal 2 into 1 was like leaving the Shoprite store at Ikeja Mall into Oshodi market. The Lounge was overcrowded and stuffy. A nice lady went out of her way to find me a seat. The choices were limited but after a long walk, gulping down a medium size Eva water did not take much time. I walked back to the relative comfort of Terminal 2 which has an inbuilt Hotel that is yet to become operational, probably as a result of struggles over who would get the concession. A major problem I encountered was that there were hardly any signs to guide passengers unlike, in major airports around the world. Lack of signs make one seek direction from people looking at one as if they will die if you do not drop some money as gift. Those in toilets trying to give you tissue paper with the hope that you will drop some money are a menace that are not as intrusive as the ones screening people for security purposes. They have a way of informing you that your “boys/girls” are here ooooh. One was informing me he would be staying from that evening till the end of elections given the lockdown. I ignored him. But when I needed information on how to get to the Lounge in Terminal I after going around without luck, he ignored me. However, another nicer one took me towards the link route encouraging me to go and see how the Nigerian government has improved the airport.

The flight was smooth. I sat with Chima, a nice young man who told me he was not avoiding voting but school was resuming in Mauritius. With a Star Alliance Gold frequent flyer, I went into the Oliver Tambo International Airport South Africa Airways Lounge in order to connect my next flight to Zimbabwe. It was a wonderful lounge. Quite the opposite of MMIA Terminal I. Very roomy with all sorts of food. But food no longer impresses me as I have reached the age in which the dietician listens to your food pattern and thereafter bans you from eating anything you had disclosed as enjoying. The pampering, including by a South African with an Edo name said to have been given by a grandfather who migrated into one of the Bantustans of the apartheid days – Transkei. She engaged me with all sorts of questions and was excited to know that I met with Madiba Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, Miriam Makeba, younger Thabo Mbeki, Cyril Ramaphosa etc., in the company of General Obasanjo who was on a diplomatic mission for President Babangida in 1991.

Boarding my flight for Harare and the flight itself were uneventful. At the visa desk of the Robert G. Mugabe International Airport, I was asked to pay \$30 for visa on arrival as the document I boarded with stated. I pointed out that I had paid and showed the reference number for my online payment. But the immigration officials were unimpressed. Sebastian, a Nigerian walked across to me and prostrated half way. He begged me not to argue but just pay. I asked why. He told me he is married to a Zimbabwean and was coming for two days to pay respect at his father-in-law’s grave side. His wife had told him to just pay and not waste time arguing because this is what Zimbabwean immigration officials normally do to Nigerians. I paid. As if showing concern, the lady handling my case asked me to go to the Immigration head office and

complain in order to get a refund. Of course, she must be joking. I decided I would cut my losses but mention my experience during my presentation. I did. Immediately after, Olawale, a compatriot came to me and introduced himself and informed me he was treated exactly the same way when he arrived on Ethiopian Airlines from Abuja.

As if it would be a relief, the UNECA officials told me it is not that Nigerians are targeted as they have some cases from other countries who went through the same experience. Why should a government feel comfortable to rip people off? If they knew that their online service was not working, why receive \$30 from people online only to be told that it is not the business of the officers at the entry point to do anything about that? Unfortunately, from my sojourn outside, I knew that the Nigerian government has no time to waste fighting for its citizens. The UN, the AU and others need to ensure that they host events in conference-friendly countries that do not discriminate among citizens of member states or play sharp practices on conference visitors. Countries contribute little or nothing to hosting conferences. The UN, the AU and other organisations spend resources gathered from other member states and/or other international organizations. These conferences add to the wealth of countries where events are held.

I made the best of my visit and did not allow the governmental rip-off of \$30 from me to affect my work and stay. I met and interacted with wonderful and welcoming Zimbabweans. I hope to share my experience beyond the conference I attended. Aside from a drive through Harare and Mbare, I went to the statue of Mbuya Nehanda – a brave lady who was hanged in 1898 for leading the first revolt against Cecil Rhodes' company.

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