

Return to Addis on a Special Assignment

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I returned to Addis Ababa yesterday November 6, 2019 to join a meeting of the Specialised Technical Committee (STC) on Migration, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons 4-8 November 2019. I could not join at the beginning as I had a commitment in Lagos on November 5, 2019.

Being back to Addis Ababa is no longer a story. After all, I was here from October 26-30, 2019, to attend an AU meeting that I was duly invited for and arrived only to be told a day after my arrival that it would likely be cancelled and indeed even before I could go through getting a temporary pass, friends told a few Ambassadors who had been in the hall that the meeting had been adjourned sine die.

I am normally not late to meetings. I got there very early only to learn that my UN Retiree ID card was no longer useful for entrance at the AU Compound. I was politely informed that the decision was made on the previous Friday that all UN IDs except those of the staff of the UN Economic Commission for Africa based in Addis Ababa would not be a means of access to the AU Compound any more. And since my UN Retiree ID was issued in NY, it was no use. I saw a young lady with a UNDP ID protesting about her being denied entry to represent her organisation at a meeting that the AU had called. Her entreaties fell on deaf ears.

So, I had to wait for my hosting AU Department to request a special invitation code from Security and upon receipt, pass the information to me and with my Nigerian passport deposited, I would get a Visitors pass for the day.

More serious for this older African was the fact that I was at the Chinese gate into the AU. Sure, you are wondering why Chinese gate? Answer is simple. Africans failed to build themselves a befitting edifice and begged the Chinese who built an imposing structure that has the Mandela Hall and statues of Kwame Nkrumah and Emperor Haile Selassie at different sides of the building. Germany also built one for Peace and Security in the name of Mwalimu Nyerere.

I have no problem with either China or Germany helping when African leaders are derelict in meeting their responsibilities. Of course, there are consequences when your friend is the one always providing the financial needs of your wife or when your friend is the one cooking nice and tasty meals for your husband.

Then what was my problem? I would have had to walk about a kilometer to get the visitors pass at the old gate and return to the Chinese Gate to enter. And please bear in mind the altitude in Addis Ababa which is put at about 3,000 metres. From somebody coming from Lagos, that is becoming below sea level in some parts, this is a feat to hurriedly accomplish. Many older people from low altitude, including from my Lagos have had difficulties working in or even visiting Addis Ababa. There had been deaths of some with very weak hearts. Some sick compatriots of mine, on the way to India for health support that could not be realised at home had been in distress on landing at Bole International Airport, one of the lowest points in Addis Ababa. In fact, a few, as I learnt, had died over time. We cannot blame them for trying, after all Nigeria's Presidents have tended to seek treatments of health challenges in Europe.

To make my plight more palatable, a younger brother from Sierra Leone, Joseph Maada Soyei took it upon himself to help out by driving his car to the Chinese gate, drove me to the Old Gate and returned me to enter through the Chinese Gate.

As I made it to the scheduled hall, the meeting had been called off. I do not want to go into why the meeting was abruptly called off after my being flown for almost 10 hours both ways and more so, when it was known I would be expected to return to Addis Ababa on the following week.

So, what's the news about my being back? The fact that I was picked at the airport to go join my first daughter, Adeyinka Sanogo, nee Badejo, and my social daughter Nafisatou Garba to partake of a dinner they had arranged at Mama Mia restaurant.

Nafi whose mother is from Shaki, Nigeria but late father from Niger had served the UN with me in Guinea-Bissau and Darfur. She is now the Finance Officer at the UN Mission to the African Union. I had met Nafi's mum in Bissau when she handed her over to me as my daughter. We subsequently spent quality time with Nafi in Lagos with my entire family when Debola, my son had his traditional marriage.

Yinka, currently a Country Director at World Food Programme (WFP) is a daughter in whom I am well pleased. She would be remembered as the young girl who in 1988, sought justice on being discriminated against, contrary to the Nigerian constitution but in furtherance of Federal Character principle that to date continues to foster mediocrity. Now this Federal Character principle is being made nonsense of by the current Nigerian President who, as I have argued elsewhere, is very nepotistic and dolling out appointments to relations, people from his town, state as well as his geopolitical zone and another geopolitical zone where he had strong links dating from his younger military days. On behalf of Adeyinka, and supported by late Pa Alfred Rewane and late G.O.K. Ajayi, we fought the case through to the Supreme Court only for the Supreme Court to agree that Adeyinka had locus standing, that a Lagos High Court judge of Yoruba extraction had denied her. But the Supreme Court dodged and refused to pronounce on the discrimination but smartly and rightly asserted that the young woman no longer needed admission into the so called unity colleges. Well, glad that Adeyinka is a success at the international level where corruption is less the issue on appointments. She had entered the WFP as an intern when a few slots were competed for and reserved for Africans who had trained in Europe or America.

Yinka was in Addis Ababa for a WFP meeting on something like transformative use of food assistance. Please don't ask me what this means but I am very proud of Adeyinka's achievements.

Since she was to fly back this morning, she wanted me to stay at the Hilton, Addis Ababa last night. I refused. She offered to pay, I still refused reminding her that my own father was not as rich as her own father. My father was a Tailor whose tailoring at Ijebu-Ode failed and became a daily paid employee of Western Region/State. The socialization I had was to go for what is functional/comfortable and not the name of the hotel. The persistence of the fear of poverty remains with me. However, I am happy that my daughter has evolved freer from my own experience.

The only way we could meet in Addis Ababa then was at the dinner before my being dropped (at my cheaper hotel with the name Jupiter, that the AU had reserved for participants), by Johnstone Oketch Summit (JOS), who has been my younger very good friend for quite a while now. He has been wonderful in brainstorming with me as I worked on the African Humanitarian Agency report - a three-month contract that ended in December last year but continues to drag on as a result of the huge variance between the Africa we have and the Africa we want. Highly meticulous and cerebral JOS is from Kenya but serving the UN OCHA out of Addis Ababa.