

Senior Moment on Duty Line

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March 25, 2019 was one of those Senior moments during which one wonders if this could be it. I called my friend who exaggerated more than I did and rightly insisted that I should divert from going to the African Union compound in Addis Ababa. I listened and proceeded to the UN Clinic at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). Yinka Adeyemi left his desk, joined me at the Clinic as I took care of vitals, and took me straight to the Chief Medical Officer. Her immediate effort put our minds at rest and I proceeded to blood works. Of course, I feel on top of the world as I write. My other friend, Bisi Dare, concluded that 18 holes of golf with him on the previous day and his observation that I do not drink enough water was most likely responsible for my Senior moment.

Since I was in the UN Compound, I decided to visit Cosmas Chanda, Head of the UNHCR who wants me to stop thanking him and Angelline Rudakubana, the Head of WFP for their support to my consultations at their respective headquarters in Rome and Geneva. Of course, the Yoruba in me makes it difficult to not express gratitude for a kindness towards me. They could have refused to lift a finger when it was not easy to complete travel requirements at the AU.

Cosmas and I shared views on cyclone Idai and the devastation in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. We reviewed a video that has gone viral but I pointed to him that it was a February 2000 rescue operation by the South African forces using 5 helicopters. I also recounted the mid 1990s El-Nino phenomenon that hit the eastern seabed of Africa resulting in huge inundation and many deaths. We wondered about our continent. Even if we cannot control for natural disasters, why can we not put in place rules and material needs to radically reduce displacements and deaths? Why should we lose hundreds of people and still have no answers since our flag independence? The wealth of this continent, if we reduce corruption and augment leadership, is enough to move away from mud houses. Reasonable building codes at subsidized support for the less well off can reduce risks of deaths from natural disasters. Schools, hospitals and stadia etc., when being built could be constructed to serve a dual purpose and become an assembly point on higher grounds when natural events happen. Cosmas enriched our discourse by bringing into focus the Cuban practice of building military barracks in a way that they could withstand weather phenomenon or other disasters as they serve as assembly points to prevent unnecessary losses of human lives during weather emergencies.

Nafi Garba, a dear friend who I had worked with in Guinea-Bissau and Darfur and actually now is a family friend showed up as Cosmas was seeing me off. Cosmas and I had not finalised how we can get African leaders to act on information that could make African lives more secure on our continent. But, I followed Nafi back to the UN Office to the African Union currently headed by Hannah Tetteh, former Foreign Minister of Ghana. The UNOAU also provides offices to organisations like UNOCHA that has a one-man Rep to the AU as well as the liaison office for UNAMID, (the AU-UN Peace Operation from which I retired).

While with Nafi, my compatriot, Adegbola, an expert on UN support for elections came in and in passing and to my excitement, mentioned Seth being around. Seth Appiah-Mensah is a cherished friend I had lost contact with. Seth had retired from the Ghanaian Navy in 2006 and stayed on at UN HQ in NY as an international civil servant. I was always excited to exchange views with Seth when I used to visit NY from whichever field office. I speedily sought Seth out. He mentioned being on a 3-year leave without pay to pursue a PhD in Australia and was on a research visit in Africa. He had been in Nigeria, Gabon and now Ethiopia interviewing on his topic.

Of course, the academic in me became very curious and he told me that the title of his focus is "Deepening security partnerships in Africa: Towards more efficient pan African response to mass atrocities." That is a very exciting topic. We related it to the general problems of insecurity in Africa. Almost 1000 deaths in 2017 as a result of flooding and landslides in Sierra Leone, as well as the uncountable deaths from Cyclone Idai are mass atrocities that African leaders are never held accountable for.

The democracy ideologues will easily retort that elections provide opportunity to remove leaders who should have provided reasonable insecurity risks reduction but did not. However, we see in much of Africa that performance in the interest of the people is hardly a yardstick for electoral behaviour. In fact, in many instances, the so called political parties are nothing other than alliances of thieves. But I agreed with Seth that a PhD work has to have a limited focus and he is quite in order with his focus.

We discussed on how African leaders need to strategically think through on whether the competition of various powers in Africa bodes well for Africa's future security. The West that has continued to exploit Africa tries to teach to Africans to be weary of the Chinese. We agreed we should be weary of the Chinese because the ideology of the Chinese engagement with Africa is not what it was under Mao Zedong. African leaders rushing to take loans that are beginning to look unpayable as China takes what resources it wants in lieu of debt pay back as well as take care of its demographic problem through settlements all over the world and especially in Africa calls for strategic thinking. We were concerned that the African Union that should lead such strategic thinking is pursuing other goals as it collects huge gifts from China. However, and in my view, the West definitely has no basis to advise Africans against the Chinese.