

Amnesty role in Africa

Dawn
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By Jonathan Power

WE arrived at the king's palace - not much more than a dilapidated corrugated iron-built structure - on the edge of the small town of Oyo, capital of the Yoruba kingdom that used to extend in pre-British days half way across the width of southern Nigeria and into Benin. Today, although it contains over 30 million people, it is a poor shadow of its former glory-power and wealth passed long ago to the bourgeoisie and - for a long period - to the army.

There was a salute by toothless old men, dressed in black, firing home made muskets. A succession of elderly men and women came and prostrated themselves full length before the king. A child dressed as an African carved doll danced. Pierre Sane, Amnesty International's Secretary-General, dressed in the russet red robes of an honorary chief, knelt before the king who called him "one of the illustrious sons of Africa". Then it was Sane's turn to speak. The crowd of about 2,000 pressed closer to hear. "Amnesty International has reached deep into the heart of Africa", he said, "deep beyond the cities of Africa, deep beyond the politicians of Africa, deep into the people of Africa."

That indeed is the conclusion I've reached myself. An organization begun only 40 years ago by a Catholic English lawyer now has a million members around the world and is known and appreciated - even in the back of beyond in darkest Africa.

For a week I have been accompanying around Nigeria a high level mission of Amnesty led by Mr Sane. Two days before, we arrived in Kaduna, the capital of the northern state of the same name. We drove along the burnt out streets - homes, small workshops, mosques and churches, almost side by side, gutted and charred. We climbed the steps up to the top floor of an old ramshackle building housing the Kaduna branch of Amnesty. Outside in the limp heat hung a banner with the Pepsi slogan affixed. "Kaduna Amnesty welcomes Pierre Sane", it read. An elderly lady walked me to the balcony. "You see those large patches of discoloured tar on the road. That's where they built bonfires and burnt people alive." Christians and Muslims rioted in February and May over the planned introduction of traditional Islamic Sharia law. Perhaps as many as 1,000 people died.

Sane addressed a meeting of the local non-governmental organizations. The room was crowded and everyone wanted the chance to speak. Amazingly, nearly everyone was brief and to the point.

"The purpose of this meeting is quite enormous" intoned the chairman in the heavy cadences of Nigerian English. "People have been burnt out and don't have the where-with-all to rebuild. The state should compensate them", said the first speaker. A Muslim from the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre said, "We Nigerians are notoriously religious. For most of the time, however, we respect each other. A few people used this freedom we have under democracy to stir things up." "Why doesn't the governor sweep the

town for arms?" asked another. "After the Biafran war they went house to house and confiscated every gun and every bullet."

We headed for the governor's office. He is a Muslim, of course, and perhaps a tolerant man - there had been no effort to erase the graffiti scribbled on the outside of his office wall: "Sir, sorry to say, 'NO' to Sharia". We were ushered into a large conference room with microphones. Sane did a succinct job of summarising the criticisms of the non-governmental organisations and the governor an equally effective and swift job of rebutting them. "I was glad to see no nation, large as well as small, escaped criticism in your annual report - I saw it discussed on CNN", the governor began. "We are introducing a form of neighborhood watch - drawn from various interest groups in each neighborhood. We'll investigate that the nominees are responsible characters and then we'll give them a monthly allowance. But we want them to be responsible not just for security but for the environment too." Then he went on down through Sane's check list: compensation - no but assistance; arms - we are looking for them; sharia - we can't solve problems by fighting. We have to have a civilized dialogue."

A couple of days before we had been in the office of President Olusegun Obasanjo, elected in a hotly contested election sixteen months ago. Obasanjo had been jailed by the military dictator, Sani Abacha, and Amnesty had campaigned vigorously for his release. In London he had paid a visit to Amnesty's offices to say thank you. Yet, for all the warmth, it was not an easy meeting. Sane and his associates from the

Nigerian branch of Amnesty had some tough things to say: "Why did the soldiers open fire during a protest in the Niger Delta? Why are women so dreadfully abused in prison. Why do the police still engage in extra-judicial executions of suspected criminals? Why is the death penalty still enforced?" Then for an hour Obasanjo took the bat and the ball, he ran, hit, ducked, lowered his voice, raised it, told anecdotes, knocked away any suggestions the Amnesty team made for review, reprimand or change, although, to be fair, he told them if they hear of any prisons where they practice torture to pass the information on to him.

On the crucial issue of the behaviour of the army he was, a Sane told him, "thinking as a soldier. You have to think of the morale of the army, yes, but you also have to think about the wrong things the army does. 'Have you ever been shot a Pierre?', countered the president, who in the war in Biafra thirty years ago was shot a many times. Sane shook his head modestly, although I know his life has been threatened number of times. "Unfortunately", joshed Obasanjo, "there's nowhere here where we can send Pierre to be shot!"

The truth is the change for the better under Obasanjo is the difference between night and day. People feel free. Political discourse is open and vigorously so. No one is incarcerated for their political opinions. Amnesty has been an important part of that change and remains an important player in the changes that have to come if Nigeria is going to take its place, as Obasanjo desires, at the top table of the world's most important democracies.