Introduction

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THE ARTICLES in this issue constitute an effort to analyse the tragic developments in contemporary Nigeria.¹ The annulment of the elections of June 12, 1993 stopped the transition to civilian rule, thereby scuttling the democratic process which had began in 1987. The maintenance of full-fledged military rule required increasing repressive measures against its opposition. The political situation reached a stalemate. The contending forces among the economic and religious elites within Nigeria have since been contesting control over the economy. Often this struggle has been perceived in religious terms. These conflicts have many-times degenerated into violence; conditions of insecurity have increased as the different factions within the country have attempted to corner for themselves the vestiges of state power. Solutions to the problems underlying this instability have remained elusive because political, religious, class and ethnic factors have to be considered. This complexity has enabled the military government to manipulate the situation for its purposes. Nigerians who can no longer endure the situation have been forced to leave the country in multitudes.

The articles in this special issue derive from a workshop held at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Canada in January 1996. The papers have been revised for publication. When the Workshop was being planned, it was difficult to attract the kind of interest that makes for successful, international conferences. The warning signs of potential disaster were clearly evident to many Nigerian observers and specialists, but there seemed to be a reluctance to discuss the long-term implications of the Nigerian situation. After years of military rule and several abortive efforts to return Nigeria to democratic rule, some scholars and political activists began to consider the possibility that the increasing scale of oppression might not easily be reversed.

The execution of Ken Siya-Wiwa and other critics of military rule in late 1995 reinforced the opinions of these sceptics. The timing of the executions altered the

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circumstances of the planned Workshop almost immediately. Those invited to the Workshop had already decided to pool their resources and energies in organizing a multi-disciplinary project of observation, collection of data, and dissemination of results on the implications of contemporary population displacement in the context of state and religious violence. The essays in this issue raise questions about the impact of structural adjustment, Nigerian peace-keeping missions abroad, and the dispersement of Nigerian intellectuals and artists throughout the world. Because of our close contacts with a great number of scholars at Nigerian universities and research institutes who are concerned with various aspects of these broad topics, we are confident that the issues discussed in the following essays, if not all the nuances of our interpretations, are the subjects of wide-spread debate within Nigeria. A number of participants felt that a seachange was underway in the perceptions and self-perceptions of Nigeria by foreign specialists and Nigerian nationals alike.

These essays also should be read from another perspective; they represent the views of informed observers, both Nigerians and expatriates, on the current political crisis in Nigeria. In addition to the integrity of the various studies included in this volume, each study also reflects a shift in the discourse of analysis. The various specialists whose analyses are presented here have slowly and painfully come to the realization that the huge population of Nigerians who are now living outside of Nigeria and the large numbers of people in Nigeria who are faced with the prospects that deteriorating political conditions could necessitate extensive population displacement within Nigeria and beyond are evidence of an impending catastrophe. It is difficult to predict the course of events for the immediate future. However, the warning signs for significant displacement have strongly affected the thinking of many scholars. In this sense, the following essays are representative of a broad range of current thinking among scholars and intellectuals.

As Toyin Falola argues, Nigeria must be perceived within the global context of refugees. As he notes, “it is only within the broad framework of African refugees that a role can be defined for Nigeria and the future can be anticipated and assessed more carefully.” Available statistics suggest that a third of the 15 million refugees in the world are in Africa. Nigeria’s share of this figure may appear insignificant, but according to Falola, “if Nigeria is allowed to emerge as a refugee-producing country, other cases may pale into insignificance—because of the numbers Nigeria can potentially generate.” Nigeria deserves immediate attention “because of its enormous potential to add to existing problems and create new ones.”

Four issues must be analysed to locate Nigeria in the African refugee crisis: first, that the conditions that produced the 30-months civil war (1968-70) remain and the fear of another war are real; that Nigeria had received refugees from neighbouring countries, but these victims of poverty, drought and economic decay have been periodically expelled in “panic moments” because of Nigeria’s own internal problems;
INTRODUCTION

that Nigeria was already generating an outward flow of population because of economic mismanagement, its population explosion, the unfulfilled expectations instilled by previous governments, the high rate of unemployment, and the extreme extent of environmental degradation. The endemic violence arising from these economic and political conditions has been reenforced by natural disasters, creeping desertification, other environmental degradation, and generalized rural poverty. The international community has not been particularly aware of these conditions. Similarly, Nigerians who have emigrated to other countries have not received much sympathy or attention because they are not usually defined officially or legally as refugees.

As Leo Dare demonstrates, political instability has been a chronic problem both before and after political independence from Britain. Population displacement has been a major factor of recent Nigerian history. What distinguishes the current crisis, according to Pat Ama Tokunbo Williams, is that religious differences have emerged as the fundamental division within Nigeria, so that violence and displacement frequently are tied to sectarian issues. In particular, the advent and propagation of militant Islam has provided the basis of this increase in sectarian strife. Jonathan T. Reynolds highlights the "politics of history" in considering why religion has become so significant. He demonstrates that the legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate and the political discourse over the interpretation of that legacy characterized the debate within Muslim circles in northern Nigeria in the 1950s and continuing thereafter was a crucial factor in the rise of this sectarianism. As Reynolds shows, the Islamic state effectively continued under the protection of British colonialism and survived into the era of modern political party politics and the suppression of civilian rule by the military.

The economic consequences of structural adjustment have complicated the political and religious divisions of the country. As Kole Ahmed Shettima, the preoccupation with quick solutions and imposed international development schemes have disrupted local populations through the coercive methods in which schemes have been implemented. "Developmentalism," as he terms these heavy-handed attempts to respond to environmental constraints and rural stagnation, have had a disastrous impact on affected communities. The efforts to impose internationally-supported projects has led to the displacement of population that has in turn increased tensions with the larger society. Kate Meagher further considers the aims of international agencies in attempting to shift the imbalance between rural and urban areas and thereby relieve some of the pressures of rapid urbanization and rural decay. But, as she demonstrates, far from reversing the flow of population from the country to the cities, the resulting impact of structural adjustment on rural-urban population movements in northern Nigeria, at least, has been negative.

Nonetheless, as Akanmu G. Adebayo shows, there has been internal population movement that has avoided structurally-determined displacement. The case of
contemporary migration among historically migrant Fulani pastoralists into southwestern Nigeria is a case in point. Despite the potential for friction between Fulani herders and Yoruba farmers, the absence of state interference has actually minimized the possibilities of friction that can result in a corresponding population displacement and retreat. Fulani transhumance patterns in managing livestock production have required access to grazing lands and the careful avoidance of the fields of local farmers near these lands. The regulation of interaction between ethnically and culturally distinct populations of farmers and herders has largely remained outside the provenance of the law and hence is difficult to observe and document, but all indications suggest that when left alone, Nigerians can indeed undertake peaceful and profitable migration within the country. Where the law has been invoked, however, tensions have tended to increase, sometimes leading to "legalized" displacement, as Paul D. Ocheje argues. In his analysis, the legal order has been used to advance class interests in the political economy of Nigeria. The law is blatantly manipulated to protect those in power and to deny legitimate redress to those who are not.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing features of the current refugee crisis that has emerged has been the flight of the educated elite. Ibrahim M. Jumare examines the displacement of the Nigerian academic community and the disastrous impact on educational standards in Nigeria. Efforts to suppress dissent and still the voices calling for the establishment of a constitutional democracy have resulted in measures that have undermined the university system, the press, and the professions. As Michael Levin concludes, the "New Nigeria" is a nation of displacement. The early warning signs are evident. Without drastic political reform, the re-establishment of civilian rule, and the reduction in corruption, according to Levin, Nigeria is likely to fall into an abyss of internal destruction. The potential for a massive refugee crisis is apparent. The current displacement of population within the country and the extent of the flight from the country may be insignificant in comparison with the effects of continuing military rule and political repression. Whether perceived in sectarian or economic terms or both, Nigeria may have perhaps crossed the threshold into endemic violence and repression. According to Falola, the best way to stem the flow of refugees from Nigeria "is not to respond only in moments of crisis, but to minimize wealth transfer and foreign exploitation and promote the judicious management of internal resources in a corruption-free environment."

NOTE

1 For a discussion to the background of the contemporary crisis, see Tom Forrest, Politics and Economic Development in Nigeria (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).