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Interview: Col. M.E. Attah

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## We can't turn back the clock to the June 12 elections

*Colonel Attah is the administrator of the predominantly Christian commercial state of Anambra in Nigeria. He was interviewed by Lawrence Freeman and Uwe Friesecke.*

**EIR:** There is a process going on in the country toward a constitutional convention. Some people have said that this is to bring a political structure into being that would help unify the different regions of Nigeria. How do you, as the governor of this state, view this constitutional convention process?

**Attah:** I think if there is anything the present federal government has done which receives popular support, it is the opportunity for people to come together and discuss problems that have existed over the years. Many people have had reservations with respect to the governance generally in the country. Some people feel that they have been dominated; others feel that they have been terribly marginalized. The people of Anambra State, along with many other states, feel that because of the last civil war, which ended over 20 years ago, by and large they have been marginalized by the northern representation in the federal structure. I think they have taken the challenge of this constitutional conference very seriously, to be able to present their case at this forum and try to resolve the issue once and for all.

**EIR:** People have told us that prior to General Abacha's taking over, the country was in a serious condition; some people said that the country was disintegrating. How did you see the period leading up to the present government?

**Attah:** It was clear to anybody who was in Nigeria that there was a lot of confusion before the present government came into being. People were not sure what direction the country was going in. Having had somebody [former head of state General Babangida] at the helm of affairs for seven to eight years, people thought that it was time we had a change, particularly when it was realized that many economic difficulties were not being resolved. And then the June 12, 1993 elections were annulled. These were thought to be one of the best [elections] so far, and not having proper publicity as to the reasons why that election had to be annulled, I think there was a lot of disenchantment on the part of the people, and

that caused a lot of insecurity. A temporary agreement was reached for an interim government, but that did not resolve the matter. Anarchy was virtually creeping in, because people almost lost confidence in the system, and nobody was really sure where to go.

I think the coming of the present government headed by General Abacha was an initiative that was welcomed, because, at least, for once, it was placed in such a position as to give direction. At least, for once, it defined the goals that would be achieved within a specific time. Opportunity had been given, during these eight years, for the problems of the country to be addressed; we lost confidence on the way. So I think the coming of the present administration has helped to reduce that tension, and for once people are willing to come together to discuss.

**EIR:** The western press is editorializing that Nigeria should simply go back to June 12 as the solution to all problems. Do you see this as realistic?

**Attah:** First of all, I should say straight-away that people who say that Nigeria should go back to June 12, are not sincere in their minds. They know that that proposal is no longer feasible and is not a solution to the present crisis. Perhaps what these people have forgotten is that, as I said earlier, a state was reached in which people lost confidence in the hierarchy of the nation, and *whoever* was able to challenge the hierarchy had the support of the population. In other words, it didn't matter *who* was going to take over the government. If you put the then-head of state General Babangida along with the people who were contesting the election, people were just willing to ensure that a change was effected.

The scenario right now is different. Then, the primary objective had been to *ease out* the head of state. Even the military sort of lent its support to that action, because within this period [the Babangida period], even the military was losing credibility. So generally, everybody wanted a change. Now that that change has been effected, I'm not sure if, given the choice now of going back to June 12, that would be the choice the populace would make. I think the reason a lot of

people keep pointing their finger to June 12, is that they feel deprived. It is not because they really support the personality [Chief Abiola], but there are fears that because this person, who was said to have won this election, came from a particular area, there are fears that perhaps that election was annulled because they didn't want people from that particular area to rule this country. I think that is the fear. And all they are really asking for, is assurance that their own children can have a place in the hierarchy of affairs.

It is also a question of overall structure. If you try to go back to June 12, you also have to ask, would the people of Anambra State, for instance, accept the leadership of the former governor here? I can tell you categorically: No. I'm aware that anywhere he appears in public, he is booed. He is now calling for the reversal to June 12. All these calls he is making from faraway Lagos. He has never made such a statement in Anambra State, which is *his home*, because he knows he doesn't have a base! And the same goes for many other states.

So if you want to bring back June 12, under what structure? Are you going to call back the governors of the states? Are you going to ask that the various legislative bodies be reinstated? We know that even the House of Representatives and the Senate bowed to the wishes of the then-executive, then-head of state, to keep him on. But because people are short-sighted, they fear that the military has been very powerful, and they are really not sure whether this government means sincerely that they have come not to continue with the old system, but to establish a party structure. I'm sure that this government means well. I'm sure that if such is achieved, which I very much hope, that there will be no cause for anybody in the future to call on the military.

If there is anybody who really is not keen for the military to come back, it is the military itself. There is no question but that the military is the rallying point of the population; we cannot fold our hands and see the nation drift to anarchy. I think that is why a lot of folks are *in* today: to ensure that the culture can be held together. Now all the time that we were almost seeing the nation as 30 separate entities—you will recall that during the interim government [summer 1993] the head of state would call a meeting and some sections of the country would not attend such a meeting. In such a situation, where do you go?

**EIR:** Then the argument that the annulment of June 12 was simply because of northern power pressure against the rest of the country is not true?

**Attah:** It is obviously not true.

**EIR:** One of the things that people say is that Nigeria, because of these diverse regions—say the north, the Hausa area; the east, Ibo; the south, Yoruba—can never achieve a real democracy, that it will always need the military. And

then, of course, we know that certain policies from abroad, from the West, from Britain and others, would like to manipulate these regions against each other. How do you respond to these kinds of statements about Nigeria?

**Attah:** I don't want to believe that Nigeria cannot be brought to democracy. All that we need is the leadership. If Nigeria can for once produce leaders—like Nehru, Gandhi, who in spite of the difficulties in India, were able to harness the entire populace, including the military, to an objective—there will be no problem. I'm sure that Nigeria is going to be able to do that. But because we have not had such a leadership, people are still individualistic in their thoughts. The moment that this discussion that is being organized—the constitutional conference—pulls through, and people from different areas of the country—the north, the east, and the west—are able to come up very clearly on the terms of cohabitation, the terms of compromise, which I'm sure there will be, there will be no further threat.

Once there is no threat to democracy, there will never be the need for the military to come in any longer. I think the present situation, where the military comes in each time, is just to make sure that the country can be kept together. A lot of blood has been shed in the past to keep this country together. And I'm sure that the present military hierarchy will not want to leave a legacy behind, that during their term, the Nigerian country fell apart. That is why the military is still at the center of affairs. Because until now, you realize that the military seemed to be the rallying force. Particularly, where the Hausas, the Ibos, the Yorubas, all are in the military, why is it that it is possible for us to speak in one voice? If there is disagreement, civil disagreement among the various sectors of the nation, then the military will become disintegrated. But we know that people are thinking in very parochial ways right now. So an organization like the Army that *insists* that we should look at issues objectively, for now, will be the rallying point. That is the basic reason.

One thing that I'm very convinced of, is that the present constitutional conference is giving room to everybody to address the former chaos. People in River State who feel marginalized because of their size, now have the opportunity to table their case. If it is the west that said that if an election had been won and the victors did not have the chance to rule; if it is the east that feels maligned because of the civil war, all will have their opportunity. Every time there is a war, people resort eventually to the conference table. It is only by such discussion, that conflicts are resolved. We are of the opinion that the situation is not so bad that we must go to war. We believe that we can meet whatever is happening by starting with a constitutional conference, where the sovereignty of everybody can be addressed; whatever the individual desire of every community can be addressed. Every country that is strong today went through a period of crisis. I don't think that Nigeria is an exception.