
Interview: Dr. Dalhatu Sarui Tafida



IMF sabotages Nigeria's fight against disease

Dr. Tafida is Nigeria's minister of health. He previously served as commissioner for health in Kaduna State, as well as commissioner for agriculture and for education. He has been active in Nigerian politics, participating in the 1989 Constituent Assembly, running for the governorship of Kaduna, and for the presidency. He was interviewed by Uwe Friesecke and Lawrence Freeman on Oct. 4, 1994 in Lagos.

EIR: Concerning your main area of responsibility, could you sketch out for us what your main concerns are, what the health situation in the country is, where your main efforts are, and where you see the biggest problems?

Tafida: . . . In most developing countries, generally, the percentage of the national budget spent on health care is negligible. The World Health Organization stipulates that at least 5% should be spent on health. In Nigeria, even though we thought we did well this year by getting a little bit over 3% of the national budget, we believe that much more can be done, so as to hit the minimum percentage stipulated by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The main thrust of this administration, is in two or three key areas. First, is the area of primary health care and disease control. That is, the provision of preventive services. We believe that Nigeria is not a rich country. This is why we go by the dictum that prevention is better than cure. We are intensifying our efforts toward an expanded program of immunization, whereby we locally produce and purchase vaccines for killer diseases among women and children: polio, tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough, tuberculosis, and yellow fever. We believe that if you can prevent these diseases among children, and the women carrying these babies, we can prevent ill health from occurring at a later stage, by a minimum of 50-60%. This is why we are spending a lot of money. This year alone, we spent \$78 million on vaccines. We buy them through Unicef, because we get them cheaper, and they are delivered when we need them.

So, we are placing a lot of emphasis on that.

Also, we are placing emphasis on certain diseases that are controllable. Diseases such as guinea worm, which has struck farmers in particular. Four or five years ago, there

was a general survey in this country, and there were nearly 700,000 cases. Today, in a survey at the end of last year, there were 11,000 cases. We achieved that either through direct intervention, or through the provision of clean, potable water in villages.

We are doing very well in the area of control of leprosy and tuberculosis. Cases of leprosy in the country have been drastically reduced, from about 300,000 cases some three or four years ago, to an almost negligible number today. In fact, there were attempts by the WHO, and the international organizations that certify Nigeria, to give Nigeria a certificate stating that we had achieved complete eradication, according to their own definition. Where you have one case in 10,000, you can consider the disease completely eradicated. But we refused. We said that we do not want to be given any certificate, because we want to continue to fight the disease until it is *actually* completely eradicated.

We were doing quite a lot on tuberculosis. But because of the appearance of AIDS—AIDS has tended to sensitize and lower the immune system of an individual suffering from tuberculosis, which makes it more difficult to treat the tuberculosis—we are beginning to see more cases of tuberculosis. But with our friends, our partners abroad, we are now mapping out a strategy that will fight the disease.

We are also investing massively in the area of drug production. We believe that whatever we do, unless we are self-reliant in drug production, all our efforts could turn to naught. This is why we are now in the process of constructing two manufacturing outfits, here in Lagos, and, alternately, in Abuja. Half of the outfit in Lagos is almost ready for production. It will be mostly to produce vaccines—we hope to produce 5 million doses of vaccines. We are also encouraging the private sector to become drug producers. Quite a number are in there. But generally, Nigerians prefer to go into quick money-making ventures, and it is not easy to convince them to invest and to wait for years.

EIR: Not just Nigerians.

A question on primary health care and vaccinations: Do you feel you are spending enough money on this? Is there a

shortage of money? What percentage of women and young children are being vaccinated?

Tafida: In 1986, there was a general survey. Less than 10% of the population of women and children were being vaccinated. Then, there was a concerted effort. A lot of financial and other resources were spent. By 1990, about 80% of this population was covered. Nigeria at that time was considered to be possibly the only country in Africa that was achieving that feat, that percentage of coverage. But because of our economic downturn, this percentage went down, and we are down to perhaps 40%. That is why, when this administration came in, there has been an effort to provide more resources. The international organizations—Unicef, U.S. Agency for International Development, WHO, the Ford Foundation—some are willing to come and to assist, and to produce a working plan. We are just about to disburse the funds, and also to sensitize the executors at the local level. Our intention is to raise the level, within six months, to about 60%, and ultimately, within a year or two, to the previous level of about 80%.

EIR: You mentioned the economic crisis. Do you see a relationship between the Structural Adjustment Programs [SAPs] that were forced on Nigeria, and the situation in the health area? Have there been pressures to lower expenditures in this field, as we see, for example, in Zimbabwe and other cases, where the International Monetary Fund literally says: Don't spend money there; pay the debt.

Tafida: Definitely. I have never been a supporter of the SAPs. I thought SAP was a way of somehow controlling our economy here. What SAP has done to the health sector, is that it has reduced the purchasing power of the naira [national currency]. Maybe three or four years ago, if you were given \$1 billion, you would say, "Oh, we got a lot of money." That would purchase quite a lot. Maybe \$1 would be 4-5 naira, three or four years ago. One day it was at 9, and when we woke up in the morning, it became 18, just like that! In seven years, the value of the naira has been mutilated, making it only one-twentieth of what it was.

Our budget in health has not gone up correspondingly. Indirectly, SAP has affected us, because we are not getting what we were before. Because we are not local producers of finished goods, we have to import, and for this, we need foreign money, which means that SAP has affected us drastically.

EIR: What about the situation with malaria? We have clearly identified a tendency for recurrence of diseases in which our aim, originally, during the 1960s, was complete eradication.

Tafida: Malaria is still with us. It has defied eradication, and we are still fighting it. Malaria is not a disease which you can control in your own country, if your neighbors are not doing anything to fight it. Your neighbors, in fact the whole

of Africa, have to do exactly as you do in your country, in the battle against mosquitos. The organisms that transmit malaria can be carried across borders. So it requires a concerted effort by everybody in the continent of Africa.

But we are doing quite a lot, within the limits of our resources, and we have not really gone down from the level of control that we had before.

EIR: One of the things that the current government, under Gen. Sani Abacha, did, was to reverse the SAP. Do you think that the government is moving in the right direction, in terms of health policy?

Tafida: I think so. There has not been a complete reversal. People say that this government "reversed" the situation of SAP. We have not really gone for a 100% reversal. We have just touched some portions of SAP, such as interest rates, foreign exchange rates, and so on. I think it is a step in the right direction. What needs to be done for this to be completely successful, is for the disbursal of the meager foreign exchange that is available to the government, to the correct sector, such as the manufacturing sector, such as drug manufacturing, and the food sector.

EIR: In the press in the West, there are tremendous attacks on Nigeria. It is said that you have a military run by northerners, who are oppressing the population, denying people human rights. I do not know what part of Nigeria you come from, but could you respond to these charges? And do you support this government's efforts to provide a transition to democracy and economic development?

Tafida: I don't agree with what the western press or western people say. Abacha is the head of state; anybody who knows Abacha, knows that he is not an ambitious person. He had been in government with the former President [Gen. Ibrahim Babangida] from the beginning until the end of that regime. He was the least controversial of the military people in government then. He acted as a bridge between the civilians that were taking over, the interim national government, and the military.

Because there is so much confusion, let me explain: 1) Those people who were propagating the line that the northerners were the ones who were doing everything, are the same people who took their son, who was then the head of government, to court, and demanded that the court declare his government illegal. Shonekan was the head of the interim national government; he was from the west of the country, the Yorubas. The Yorubas took that government to court, to declare it illegal. 2) The same government resigned on its own, and invited Abacha to come and take over. There was no broadcast of a coup. Normally when you have a coup, you make a broadcast, you spell out your program, and the reason for the takeover. Shonekan, the head of the interim national government, asked Abacha to take over, which he did. Abacha must have been requested to take over in a hurry,

because he did not have a program, a plan.

So when he took over, he looked around, and invited everybody, from west to east, everywhere in the country, to come and assist him in running the government. He made sure that in the two highest possible levels of the government, at that time—the Provisional Ruling Council and the Federal Executive Council—civilians were involved. In fact, in the Federal Executive Council, out of 32 people, there were only three military—he himself, the number-two man, and the minister of federal capital territory. All the rest, 29 of us, were civilians.

You can see that Abacha did not intend to take over. When he took over, he called people in to form a national government. There were two parties invited, people from both sides, everybody was invited. There was no major tribe that was not there. Nobody had plans to take over by military force. If that had occurred, you would not see civilians there. I, as a civilian minister, have had full freedom to execute plans, within the limits of our resources. There has been no interference. And it is true also with the other civilian ministers. Abacha never interfered. Every state in the federation—30 of them—was represented.

Chief Abiola, the man who was involved so much in the controversy, actually invited Abacha to take over! They were friends. He said, please come and take over, to save this country. Immediately, Abacha took over. It was televised. He visited, was the first caller at this barrack in Lagos. You saw them clapping, like friends who had not met for 20 years; they hugged each other—Abiola and Abacha. If the prophets come again—Mohammed, Jesus—the Nigerians would attack them and say they are wrong. This is what the situation is in Nigeria today. Even if it is their own tribe, a group in the tribe would gang up and say, this man is not doing what we want him to do.

EIR: You say the general invited all the civilians with expertise in different areas to help him govern the country. Recently there have been changes in the military leadership of the country, and the Provisional Ruling Council has been enlarged. The story that the British press in particular presented, is that this has essentially kicked the civilians out of real decision-making positions, that they have no vote, and, therefore, reality is the tightening grip of the military junta. How would you see that?

Tafida: I don't see it that way. One, there is still the Federal Executive Council. The change that took place was in the Provisional Ruling Council, and I think we Nigerians should be held responsible for that. There was so much confusion, so much disorder in this country, to the extent that every trade union just decided to declare a dispute, a nonexistent dispute, and the country was nearly paralyzed—in the oil industry, the banking industry, and so on. At that time, we, the civilians, were everywhere. We were in the Provisional Ruling Council, we were in the Federal Executive Council.

And I thought that if I had the responsibility that Abacha had, I would do the same. I would make sure I brought in a structure that would enable us to be solid, whenever there is confusion, unwarranted crises, unwarranted strikes, so that we can deal with the situation. It is not that Abacha wants to remain in office much longer than necessary. It is just to safeguard the security and the unity of this country.

Are we pretending that this is not a military regime? It is a military regime. But the military regime, we believe, should behave like a military regime. If today you bring everybody other than Abacha into the government and into the Provisional Ruling Council, it would still be a military regime, but it would be a weak military regime, because of Abacha's nature. In fact, Abacha behaves much more democratically than the so-called politicians, who regard themselves as democratic. Abacha would listen to you, and give you every opportunity. I support this, so that we can have a solid base, more stability, so that finally, when the government is handed over to the civilians, it will be a more durable structure.

The country had become a no-man's land. People were just doing what they liked. But with this restructuring, I think that everybody is now happy. That is why some of you are here. If you had been here a month ago or two months ago, it was hell.

EIR: How confident are you that the unity which General Abacha obviously tried to practice, by bringing in ministers from the southwest, from the east, from the north, can be kept? The line from the British press, from the American press, is that some of the people who are not from the north, like the second-in-command or the minister of transportation, are relatively isolated figureheads, and that this is not serious.

Tafida: You can go and ask them, and they will tell you the truth. I know the minister of transport very well, he is very forthright, he will tell you exactly what is on his mind. There was a call for him to leave, and he came out publicly and said he was *not* leaving. The other Yorubas in the cabinet were asked to leave by a gang of their tribesmen, and they came out publicly to say, "No." CNN [Cable News Network] and the press are trying to mold the opinion of everybody in the world, whether it is true or not.

Yesterday, I saw some rogues, some vandals breaking into an office. They took the side of the American government, and the reporters said, "They are not looting, they were just so happy, that they were doing this." Now, if it had been the other way around, they would paint it as looting. We know about all these gimmicks.

They can say whatever they like, but we will have our way, because this is our own country. It is our own country; if we fail, we fail ourselves. It is our people. I don't think anybody loves our own people more than we love them.