

Nigeria's policy debate rages at home and abroad

by Uwe Friesecke

On June 27, the National Constitutional Conference in Nigeria presented the report of its deliberations to Head of State Gen. Sani Abacha. He used this occasion in the capital city of Abuja to announce the lifting of the ban on political activities, and said that he would make public the government's plan for transition to civilian rule in October. This move will significantly undercut the worldwide activities of the so-called democracy movement against the Nigerian government.

Recently the National Democratic Coalition (Nadeco) had mobilized for a week of protests and picketing in London against the Nigerian government. This was countered by a delegation of members of the Constitutional Conference who came to London to present the real picture of Nigeria's political development. This delegation was led by Chief C.O. Ojukwu, the former Biafran leader, and Chief Abiola Ogundokun from Nigeria's southwest. They were the invited speakers at a conference organized by the Nigerian Patriots on "Our Nigeria" on the evening of June 10, and they gave a press conference in London at the Cafe Royal on June 12.

Nadeco had chosen the week of June 12 in commemoration of the annulled election two years ago, and they were not very happy to see prominent Nigerians from the National Constitutional Conference there to present a different view about Nigeria than their own. Nadeco resorted to a violent attempt to break up the evening meeting, and also rudely disrupted the press conference two days later. Thus they showed quite clearly, that their tolerance of "democracy" only applies to those who are of their own opinion, but to no one who holds different views. During the course of the two events, it became quite clear that Nadeco was using professional tactics of disruption and provocation. While they were able to create much commotion and also limited fistfights, Nadeco failed to break up the meeting or the press conference, which was largely due to the patience of the organizers of the evening conference, the Nigerian Patriots, and the forceful response of Chief Ojukwu, Chief Abiola Ogundokun, and the other speakers.

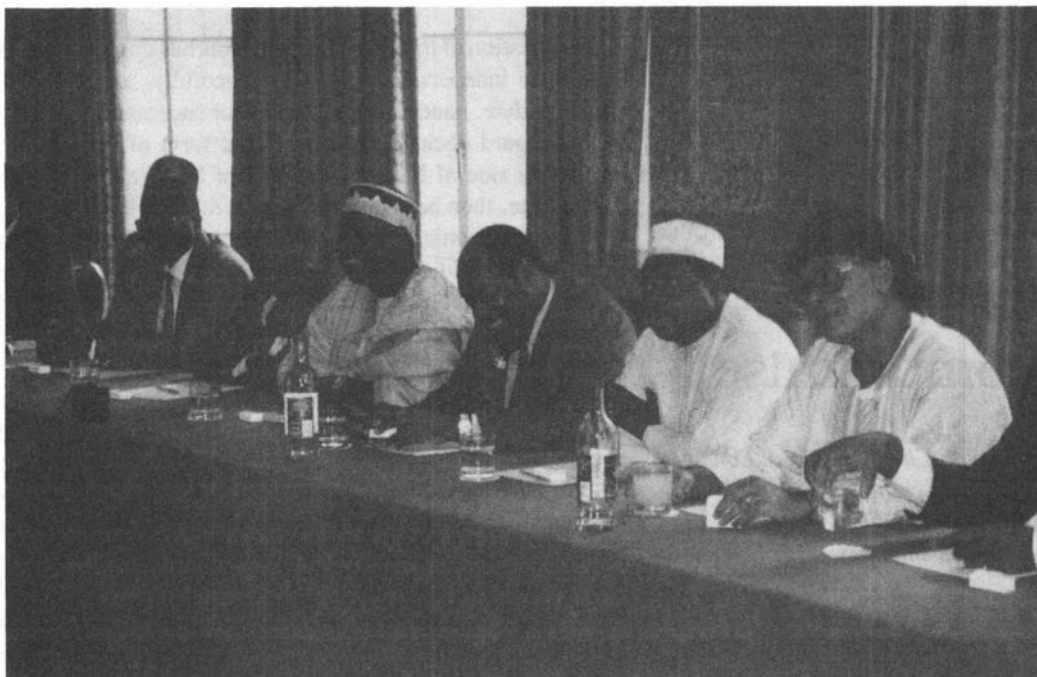
Especially Chief Ojukwu took the moral high ground in front of the audience, when he challenged his opponents to drop their abuses. "I am not frightened. I have done everything in this world. I have had enough of violence and it

doesn't solve anything," he declared. He challenged Nadeco to say what they have achieved for Nigeria, and contrasted it to what he and his colleagues had done at the Constitutional Conference. Chief Ojukwu explained that he had gone to the national capital of Abuja for the Constitutional Conference to achieve a national compromise, which will not be perfect but will be the basis to preserve peace and build the future of the country. In contrast, he said, Nadeco is engaged in pure nihilism and in fighting a war of the past. Chief Ojukwu assured the audience that he is very confident, that most of the things the Constitutional Conference recommended will be accepted by the government of Gen. Sani Abacha.

Chief Abiola Ogundokun closed the meeting, which by the time he spoke was already in an uproar, with a strong attack on TransAfrica, the group from New York which is calling for sanctions against Nigeria, and those prominent Nigerians, such as Professor Akinyemi, Wole Soyinka, and General Akinrinade, who at one time or another were very close collaborators of military regimes in Nigeria and who are now hypocritically posing as the champions of democracy.

At the press conference two days later, Prof. E.A. Opia from Delta State, also a prominent member of the Constitutional Conference, joined the group. Chief Ojukwu reemphasized that there was no alternative to dialogue and that democracy in Nigeria will only be built if Nigerians reach a national compromise first, which for him is the agreement on a rotational presidency, which is one of the recommendations contained in the report that the Constitutional Conference presented to the government on June 27.

Professor Opia for his part made a passionate plea, that the most important result of the conference was, that everybody from all parts of the country agreed to keep Nigeria united. He also expressed his optimism that the ideas of participation and power-sharing were well entrenched in the final draft of the report of the Constitutional Conference. Asked whether the real reason for the attacks on Nigeria's current government were not the anti-International Monetary Fund (IMF) orientation of its economic policy, Professor Opia declared emphatically that the government will never accept economic bondage, and he used the occasion to highlight the importance of the Petroleum Trust Fund for Nigeria's economic development. He rejected the often-voiced



Members of the National Constitutional Conference hold a press conference in London on June 12, to counteract the propaganda campaign of opponents of the Nigerian government. From right: Prof. E.A. Opia, Chief C.O. Ojukwu, and Chief Abiola Ogundokun.

criticism of this fund by the western financial press, and commended the Abacha government for having the courage to use this fund to finally start rehabilitating infrastructure throughout the country, especially in the rural areas.

Battle over IMF program

While certain political observers in London and Nigeria noticed with satisfaction that finally some prominent Nigerians have gone to Europe and to combat the propaganda offensive of Nadeco in public, at home, in Nigeria, the debate about the future economic course of the government continued even more pointedly. The context for this was the visit of an IMF-World Bank team at the end of May. According to Reuters, the chairman of the National Economic Intelligence Committee (NEIC), Prof. Sam Aluko, wrote a letter to the minister of finance and the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, expressing his deepest concern over the danger of making any more compromises with those international financial institutions. According to Reuters, the NEIC criticizes, in particular, the sharp devaluation of Nigeria's currency, the naira, from 22 to the dollar in 1994 to 80-82 in 1995, which in their opinion has been responsible for the pauperization of the majority of Nigerians and the collapse of any productive activity in the country.

During the IMF's team visit to the country, Abuja was rife with rumors that they had demanded much more far-reaching compromises from the Abacha government, such as further devaluation of the naira; another increase in the prices of petroleum, kerosene, and diesel; removal of the subsidy on fertilizers; removal of the official exchange rate of 22 naira to the dollar; and unlimited liberalization of the

banking sector, including the uncontrolled freeing of the interest rates and significantly increased debt repayment to foreign creditors.

It is clear that a group of powerful Nigerians, entrenched in the banking sector and in the affiliates of multinational corporations such as Pepsi Cola Nigeria, who had pushed for the IMF's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) back during the regime of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, are exerting tremendous pressure on General Abacha to go back to IMF-World Bank policies. They are hysterically denying the reality of all those examples outside Nigeria, such as Mexico, Russia, and numerous African countries, where the IMF-World Bank policy has already led to disaster. Unfortunately, this group has support in certain corners of the Nigerian political elite, who do not care if they sell out their country and destroy the livelihood of Nigeria's people, if they only can enrich themselves.

But some political observers point to the irony that those people who are desperately lobbying for compromises with the IMF, will soon find that the IMF and the World Bank one day will simply not be around any longer, because they have gone bankrupt and were buried under the collapsing world monetary system. After the success of the Constitutional Conference, General Abacha, who won his credibility with the way he allowed the conference to operate, is in a stronger position than ever. Hopes and expectations for the transitional process are high. The danger of the months ahead is, that if the economy declines further and the deterioration of living conditions becomes unbearable for the people, the political gains of the last 18 months could be shattered. One hopes that the government will now use its position of strength to effect visible improvements in the economy of the country.