

---

Vanguard (Lagos) »

15 MARCH 2004

---

## Nigeria: Revitalising the Railways

---

OPINION

By Salisu Dambatta

*With the 25-year plan, it is possible to have an improved rail system in a decade.*

ONCE upon a time, the Nigerian railways served the nation as the main means of transporting large volumes of heavy goods and passengers from the far-flung hinterland of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to its busiest seaports in Lagos and Port Harcourt, and from the ports to the hinterland.

The railways then tremendously facilitated our internal economic development and foreign trade, which was mostly in primary products. Movement of goods and passengers by rail remains cheaper, safer and more reliable, even if it is slower than by road. The memory of railway wagons of the 1960s carrying tonnes of groundnuts from the Pyramids of Kano and the groundnut depots of Ringim, Malam Madori, Gujungu and Nguru to the ports for export; that of a multitude of passengers, both travelling for pleasure and for business along the 3,505 track length of the Nigerian railways network through Port Harcourt, Enugu, Kafanchan, Kaduna, Zaria, Funtua, Kaura Namoda, Kano, Hadejia, Minna, Ilorin, Ibadan, Gusau, Bauchi, Gombe and Maiduguri, represents a spectacle that depicted the best era of the railways as the main engine of transportation in this country.

As a Youth Corps member serving in Enugu of the old Anambra State in the early 1980s, this writer travelled between Enugu and Port Harcourt and between Port Harcourt and Enugu and also between Enugu and Kano, just to have a feel of travelling by train. The overcrowding, the noisy atmosphere, the frequent and unceasing quarrels among passengers and the patience-stretching delays, gave each trip a unique character without diminishing the fact that, for me, it was all a rewarding experience. But over time, the Nigerian railways became a victim of countless problems, including poor funding, poor maintenance of existing facilities, lack of fresh investment and general neglect. To alleviate these problems and others bedeviling the railways, President Olusegun Obasanjo said while inaugurating the National Assembly on June 4, 1999, that as part of his priority measures to improve the transport sector, his administration would "rehabilitate, modernise and expand our railways so that this national asset can once more become relevant to our economic development."

### Stakeholders' summit

As part of the painstaking process to abide by that promise, a Nigerian Railway Corporation Stakeholders' Summit was organised in Abuja between February 17 and 18, 2004, during which experts and stakeholders discussed the importance, roles, prospects, problems and the ways out for the railways. However, long before the recent stakeholders' summit on the railways, President Obasanjo had ensured that the first Saturday Forum initiated and hosted by the President in the Aso Rock Villa in July 1999, was on the Nigerian railways. During the exercise, the President, leading other top government officials and an array of railway stakeholders, frankly discussed all the major problems crippling the railways and offered workable ideas, the implementation of which could lead to bringing the railways back to life effectively.

As evidence of government's willingness to practically make the railway serve the people, not long after the Saturday Forum, trains and other equipment were rehabilitated in Lagos and Port Harcourt, leading to the restoration of mass transit train services in the two coastal cities.

Perhaps, more significant is the report in a government publication: "A foundation to build on" indicating that the federal government has "renewed the abandoned contract for the rehabilitation of the country's rail network by the Chinese Civil Engineering and Construction Company. Fifty more locomotives, 400 wagons, 20 rail buses and 150 coaches were supplied by the company in 2001."

The same publication said that "A 25-year Strategic Development Plan for the railways in Nigeria has been approved by the Federal Executive Council and an Inter-Ministerial Committee has been inaugurated for its implementation. The 25-year plan envisages the construction of new lines or the relaying and double tracking of existing lines to make the railway network safer, modern and cover more sections of the country. The planners have divided the project into 19 phases. The longest lines proposed are Phase 19 or Makurdi-Wukari-Jalingo branch, followed by Phase 16 or the Gombe-Yola portion and Phase 12, that is, Kano-Katsina, all three being new lines. Currently, a huge portion of Nigeria is without railway service, especially the sizeable Northwest and Northeast, a fact acknowledged by the President in a recent speech.

President Obasanjo has in a speech read for him by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Chief Ufot Ekaette, at the Nigerian Railway Corporation's Stakeholders' Summit in Abuja on February 17, 2004, appreciated the role of the railway in promoting national unity by saying that, "The railway has been known to promote national cohesion and has the potential to create job opportunities for the teeming mass unemployed youths directly and indirectly." This justifies the proposal to extend it to more parts of Nigeria. One major flaw of the Nigerian railway network that is not addressed by the 25-year Strategic Development Plan is the fact that no airport in the country is linked to it and only two seaports, Lagos and Port Harcourt, are linked by rail. However, Phase 15 of the plan is billed to link up Calabar, a port city, through the proposed new Umuahia-Onitsha-Arochuku-Calabar line.

### Private sector participation

The 25-year Strategic Development Plan for the railways could be accelerated if the private sector responded positively to an invitation by the President to play a major role in the revitalisation of the railway. Currently, the government is funding the railways single-handedly. The President told the two-day Stakeholders' summit: "We (Government) can no longer afford to fund the railway exclusively if meaningful progress is to be recorded in the sub-sector.

Therefore, like elsewhere around the world, we are extending an invitation to the organised private sector and other stakeholders to join forces with the government in moving the railway forward." Some participants at the summit doubted the ability of the private sector to fund the railways, pointing out that Euro Tunnel Plc, a private sector British-French company running freight and passenger trains between Britain and mainland Europe through the Channel Tunnel, is in financial crisis despite a boom in traffic transported below the Channel. Some of the participants recalled that the British Government reviewed its failed British Railway privatisation as the private sector operators lacked the financial and technical muscles to run the rail network properly.

It is pleasant that, as the Minister of Transport, Dr. Abiye Precious Sekibo disclosed at an interactive session with the staff and management of the Nigerian Railway Corporation in Lagos, the Chinese, the South Africans, the Canadians, the Swedish and the

Indians made inquiries regarding investment or some form of agreements to revitalise the railways. This raises hope that it is possible to have an improved Nigerian railways within a decade.

---

Copyright © 2004 Vanguard. All rights reserved. Distributed by AllAfrica Global Media (allAfrica.com). To contact the copyright holder directly for corrections — or for permission to republish or make other authorized use of this material, click here.

AllAfrica publishes around 800 reports a day from more than 140 news organizations and over 500 other institutions and individuals, representing a diversity of positions on every topic. We publish news and views ranging from vigorous opponents of governments to government publications and spokespersons. Publishers named above each report are responsible for their own content, which AllAfrica does not have the legal right to edit or correct.

Articles and commentaries that identify allAfrica.com as the publisher are produced or commissioned by AllAfrica. To address comments or complaints, please Contact us.

---

AllAfrica is a voice of, by and about Africa - aggregating, producing and distributing 800 news and information items daily from over 140 African news organizations and our own reporters to an African and global public. We operate from Cape Town, Dakar, Abuja, Monrovia, Nairobi and Washington DC.

© 2018 AllAfrica

AllAfrica - All the Time