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Nigeria: Modern Rail System - \$8.3bn Contract Under Way - Obj

By Daniel Idonor

Abuja — President Olusegun Obasanjo has disclosed that the contract for the \$8.3 billion first phase of the modernization and expansion programme of the Nigeria Railway from Lagos to Kano would be signed this month and work would commence immediately thereafter.

In his broadcast to the nation yesterday evening, he however, warned people who have encroached on railway land to leave immediately, just as he asked State Governments to readily make available land that would be needed in the expansion programme of the railway.

The President who noted that \$2 billion out of the money to be used for the first phase would be obtained as soft loan from the Chinese Government. "Phase I is scheduled to be completed in four years at a cost of \$8.3 billion of which \$2 billion is being obtained as soft loan from the Chinese Government. Phase II, which will be the second spine of the backbone- Port Harcourt to Jos, with the same design criteria, will follow on the heels of Phase I.

"In this regard, those who have encroached on railway land should quietly leave such piece of land to save the Government and themselves the effort of using all means to reclaim such right of way. There will also be need to acquire new land for the modernization and expansion to new locations.

I appeal to State Governments and land occupiers to co-operate in making land available for this all-important project.

"By the grace of God Almighty, contract formalities for the award and commencement of Lagos-Kano 1st Phase Project of the modernization programme will be signed this month; and construction work will commence immediately thereafter", he added.

The President who said that it is unfortunate that like the power sector, the railway has suffered neglect, added however, that comprehensive agenda for the nation's railway transportation system that is inter-modal "includes road, inland waterways, and air transportation.

Our investments in these areas are coordinated to make a lasting impact through a holistic transportation system across the country. Though I have not included bicycles in the inter-modal list of transport systems, it must not be forgotten, if only for its physical exercise and therefore, health implications".

Linking the modernization and expansion of the railways to meeting the nation's socio-economic, political, cultural development and integration objectives, he hoped that "subsequent Administrations will buy into this vision and that other friendly countries will offer similar concessionary loan assistance to continue the project in the years ahead with the possibility of a West African regional railway system".

Going down memory lane, President Obasanjo recalled that "actual railway construction in Nigeria commenced in 1898 with a 32 km line of 1067mm gauge from Iddo (Lagos State) to Otta (Ogun State), which was further extended to Ibadan covering a total of 193 km in 1901. Railway construction continued incrementally in such manners between 1901-1910, Ibadan-Jebba (295 km); 1907-1911, Kano-Baro (562 km); 1909-1915, Jebba-Minna (252 km); 1914-1916, Port-Harcourt-Enugu (243 km); and 1922-1927, Kafanchan-Jos (179 km).

"Unfortunately, in spite of the obvious benefits of railway transportation, further development was more or less stultified between 1927 and 1958- a period of thirty-one years. It was not until 1958 with the construction of Kafanchan to Bauchi line (238 km) that work resumed on the rail system. This was followed between 1961-1964 with the Bauchi-Maiduguri line (302km). This brought the total rail route of the Nigerian Railway Network to 3505 km (and if sidings are included, to 4,332 km)".

The President noted that the urgent need to revamp the rail sector stems from the fact that "statistics on passenger and freight traffic show that while the Corporation in 1964 carried 11,288,000 passengers and 2,960,000 tonnes of freight, these figures dropped to 4,342,000 passengers and 1,098,000 tonnes of freight in 1974.

Thereafter passenger traffic gradually grew back to 6.7 million in 1978 and reached a peak of 15.5 million in 1984 with the help of RITES of India brought in by our military administration. This declined again to 3.0 million in 1991 and 1.6 million in 2003. The same dismal performance is also reflected in the freight traffic fluctuation from 3 million tones in the 1960's and 1970's to less than 100,000 tonnes in recent times.

"The same deplorable performance is reflected in the 6% daily locomotive availability rate and in the fact that only 25% of the over 700 Coaches and 4,000 wagons were available for use in recent times. It was certainly a combination of corruption, poor management, inefficiency, lack of adequate marketing, failure to develop new lines and to plan ahead or introduce new technology and adapt to global best practices that saw the near total collapse of the railway in Nigeria.

"Government made several efforts in the last 20 years to address the deterioration. Such efforts included:

- (a) Techno-Managerial Services by Rites of India (1979 - 1982);
- (b) Romanian Project for the supply of Rolling Stock and Workshop equipment (1986 - 1996) but inconclusive; and
- (c) CCECC Track Rehabilitation and some Rolling Stock (1995 - 2003)".

He also disclosed that "as part of the effort to bring in private capital, skills and technology, the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE) is already considering the possibility of concessioning the existing East, West and Central lines (i.e. Port-Harcourt to Maiduguri with link line from Kafanchan to Kaduna; Lagos to Kano; and Itakpe to Ajaokuta to Warri Rail Lines respectively). Even this requires minimal rehabilitation to get value for money from concessionaires.

"Today, we have a new vision, a new commitment, and a holistic strategic plan encompassing expansion and modernization of the Railway to be implemented within a 25-year time frame. Various scenarios and options of commencing and progressing with the implementation of the Plan have been presented for consideration at various fora. Following the presentation of Draft Final Proposal to the Federal Executive Council on 19th July, 2006 the Federal Government endorsed an implementation Plan entailing:

- (a) 3 Nos. Longitudinal Lines, Lagos - Up North, Warri - Up North and Port Harcourt - Up North

(b) 4 Nos. Latitudinal Lines; and

(c) Branch and Extension Lines

"This covers all the State Capitals and major commercial centers in the country. Within this framework, it is further agreed that the 1st Phase of the Railway Line should entail the Lagos-Kano Standard gauge, double track railway line spanning over 1315 kilometers with a loop from Minna to Abuja and only Abuja to Kaduna being single track due to inadequate anticipated traffic. It was further agreed that the scope of work, segmentation and construction will follow 5 segments:

Lagos - Ibadan

Ibadan - Ilorin

Ilorin - Minna

Minna - Kano; and

Minna - Abuja - Kaduna

This new approach will significantly impact on our people and their communities. It will ease movement, reduce reliance on vehicles and the airport, promote tourism, and build on the foundations of integration, unity, cooperation, and social harmony that we have been working so hard to consolidate".

Giving further insight into what the new railway would portend, President Obasanjo stated that "the design criteria or technical features are:

1. A speed of 120 to 150 km/hour for passenger service
2. A speed of 80km/hour for freight service
3. Rail gauge of 1435 mm Standard Gauge
4. Maximum gradient of 12%, and in exceptional situations 15%;
5. Minimum curve radius: ordinary terrain 2000m, difficult terrain 1200m;
6. Traction type: diesel-electric engine (3 phase engine).
7. Axle weight: 23 tons
8. Type of rail: 60kg/m
9. Block type: computer interlocking, inter-station automatic block, subject to being upgradeable.
10. Continuous welded rail shall be applied on all the tracks.

"The construction of the rail line will employ tens of thousands of Nigerians immediately. The entire project will promote technology transfer, the building of new skills, and the development of rail allied industries. As much as possible, local materials will be used.

Furthermore, the towns and communities around the railways will experience an improved socio-economic activity that reduces their unemployment rates".

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