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Nigeria: All for Nigerian Railways

By Chidi Ugwu

Lagos — *Embarking on construction of standard railway lines by the federal government will bring socio-economic boost to the nation's economy. CHIDI UGWU, who witnessed the flagging off ceremony of the first phase of the railway modernization project, expected to gulp a whopping \$40 billion x-rays the gains of the project.*

WHEN in 1812 Oliver Evans, a United States engineer and inventor, published his vision of what steam railways could become, with cities and towns linked by a network of long distance railways plied by speedy locomotives, he no doubt was thinking of greatly reducing the time required for personal travel and for transportaton of goods.

Evans specified that there should be separate sets of parallel tracks for trains going in different directions. The gauge Act passed by the parliament in 1846 made the standard gauge compulsory for all new railways.

However, when, the colonial masters built the Nigeria rail track in 1898, it was narrow gauge rail lines. In recent times standard railway gauge is used in most parts of the world. Lately, major steps toward the modernization of the Nigerian rail sector were taken by the Federal Government, to phase out the narrow gauge rail lines and construct a new standard gauge rail lines.

To this end, President Olusegun Obasanjo on November 23, 2006, at Kajola, Ifo Local Government Area of Ogun State, flagged off the first phase of the railway modernization project expected to cost over \$40 billion on completion.

With the kick-off of the Lagos-Kano modern railway modernization project at Kajola, many now express hope that at last the mass transit goal of the Federal Government is on the verge of being realized.

There was so much excitement at the venue of the inauguration of the Lagos-Kano standard gauge line as it was attended by so many dignitaries. It was a colourful ceremony that attracted ministers and some state chief executives. The governors present include Olagunsoye Oyinlola of Osun State, and Gbenga Daniel of Ogun State.

Present also were the sole administrator of Ekiti State, Olatunji Olurin and former governor of Oyo State, Adebayo Alao-Akala.

Past and present chief executives of Nigerian Railway Corporation, including pensioners were also present. Residents of Kajola were in their best wears to welcome the august visitors. Traditional rulers, chiefs and elders, the old and young, in the community from the expression written on their faces were very pleased to see the unusual crowd, equipment, and movements in their neighbourhood.

They had every reason to be happy. Kajola was the first beneficiary of the project. It was the host of the first shunting yard, locomotive and rolling stock repair workshop site for the Lagos-Kano standard gauge rail line. The rail terminus and its associated facilities which include related railway components factories and other auxiliary services to be established in the area will no doubt add value to not only the people of Kajola but beyond.

Giving an insight into the basis of the project and its gains, President Olusegun Obasanjo said: "In my August 9, 2006 nationwide broadcast, I did declare that the administration had come up with a very bold and comprehensive agenda for the re-development, modernization and expansion of our national railway transportation system to meet our socio-economic, political and cultural development and integration objectives.

"I also did emphasize the need for massive expansion and improvement in the nation's transport infrastructures and services to enable them cope with the anticipated 10 per cent annual growth of our economy over the next decade. The critical role of the railway system in contributing to the envisaged seamless, integrated and coordinated inter-modal transport services was equally re-affirmed."

He disclosed that when fully implemented, the project will involve 8,000 kilometres of standard gauge railway line incorporating three main longitudinal lines from North to South, five main latitudinal lines from East to West, connecting most of the state capitals and major economic centres in the country.

According to Obasanjo, "the historic ground-breaking ceremony and flag-off of the construction of the double lane standard gauge line from Lagos to Kano marked the first major step in the quest for a modern railway system to drive and compliment our economic regeneration efforts. All practical steps towards the early commencement and timely completion of this project have been taken."

He noted that the multiplier effects of the project particularly in the communities where it will pass through were enormous. These include employment generation, technology development, economic improvement of contiguous communities, and the development of railway related auxiliary industries.

He called on state governors, local governments and inhabitants of contiguous communities to offer what he called "maximum cooperation and support" to the federal government and other relevant agencies, the executing contractor, and the supervising consultants to ensure that the project is completed on schedule.

The minister of State for Transport, Mallam Mohammed Habib Aliyu had earlier in his address pointed out that the project was based on a concession model which will ensure the concessionaries acquiring and owning their operating locomotives and rolling stocks and rolling stocks.

Aliyu who has been holding forth in the Federal Ministry of Transport since the removal of Dr precious Abiye Sekibo, few months ago, disclosed that an international group Infrastructica, has formed a partnership with a group of indigenous companies to invest \$1.4billion over 10 years for the development of the railway infrastructures and services.

He lauded President Obasanjo for the various initiatives he had taken since he mounted the saddle of leadership more than seven years ago, even as he enumerated the reforms recorded in various sectors of the economy.

The expected carrying capacity of the first phase of the project is over 50 pairs of trains per day besides 30 to 40 million tonnes of goods per annum.

The prospects of the new double track rail line are enormous. The socio-economic effects include to promote mining of solid minerals; stimulating the development of agriculture; promoting tourism; local content; job creation; development of rail-related auxiliary industries; technology transfer and acquisition and urban development among other multiplier effects arising from establishment of railway-related industries in the railway towns and adjoining communities.

The successful completion of the first phase of the project is aimed at achieving the envisaged strategic objectives of developing a well coordinated, integrated and efficient inter-modal transport services capable of sustaining the projected eight to 10 per cent annual growth of the economy in the next couple of years.

For the Lagos-Kano route, the project will start from Apapa Tin can Island Port, the nation's premier seaports through Abeokuta, Ibadan, Osogbo, Ilorin, Minna, Kaduna, to Kano.

It must be noted that the railway transport in the country has been bedeviled with many problems over the years.

Apart from the decline in passenger and freight movements, inadequate equipment and infrastructure to run an efficient rail transport as it is obtainable in the developed world, has also been a bottleneck.

The Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC) which was the operating company and regulator since 1955 was like most government parastatals, run like a non-profitable venture with every area of leakages and waste getting wider and wider as the years roll by.

The minister of stake for transport made reference to the factors that have helped in no small way to cripple efficient railway operation in the country. His words: "It is unfortunate and regrettable that due to a combination of funding, administrative and staffing constraints, our railway network has gone through a steady over the last two decades.

Consequent upon this state of avoidable atrophy, the railway passenger traffic declined from over 14 million in the early 1980's to less than 1 million in 2005.

Similarly, Freight traffic went down from a peak capacity of 3 million tones to less than half a million tones in 2005.

Therefore, with the ageing and dilapidated infrastructures and rolling stocks, purposeful concessioning of the existing lines without rehabilitation and modernization has become almost impossible."

Rehabilitation and repairs of the railway in the country did not start with the President Obasanjo administration. Several attempts were made in the past, but it did not yield the desired results.

For instance, between 1979 and 1982, an Indian company, RITES was given the technical management of the railways. It failed. Between 1986 and 1996, another attempt was made when a Romanian company was given the contract to undertake the rolling stock and workshop supply. It was not a success story either. Again, between 1995 and 2003, a track rehabilitation and rolling stock supply contract was undertaken by CCECC prior to the railway privatization study by the Bureau for Public Enterprises (BPE). The results were not to far from previous ones, managerial and business plan for NRC was also done by CANAC Techno between 1001 and 2003.

Summarily various short-term measures put in place to reverse the declining fortunes of the railways in the last two decades have not been successful.

It is therefore expected that the present move of the Federal Government to boost the fortunes of railway transport will take cognizance of these pitfalls in the drive to actualize the first phase of the project.

The first phase of the project which involves 1,315km double track standard gauge rail line will cost not less than \$8.3 billion United States dollars. This excludes administrative, supervisory, project management and consultancy costs. Though, it is divided into segments, the entire project was awarded to CCEC.

With the successful kick-off of the project which was witnessed by dignitaries from all walks of life, hope for mass transit transportation, particularly the actualization of the aims and objectives of the dry ports concept situated in different parts of the country has been rekindled.

It is also expected that the very heavy vehicular movement in cities like Lagos will be eased out while the high transportation fares will be reduced.

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