

**“Cameroon-Nigeria amity, although anchored on a shared destiny, is regulated by the values of a cherished sovereignty,” Nigerian Consul-General Dr. Kenneth Nsor**

**By Jesse Konang**

The Federal Republic of Nigeria with an area of 923,768 square kilometres, 36 states, 774 local government councils, and 250 distinct languages is situated in West Africa. She is the most populous country in Africa and the World’s most populous Black nation with a population estimate of 140 million citizens (2006 census).

In Nigeria’s relationship with her neighbours, Cameroon, which borders her to the east, occupies a special position, according to the Consular Guide of the Consulate-General of Nigeria in Buea. This is especially so in view of the many years of verbal vituperation, military and legal manoeuvres over the ownership of the oil-rich land and sea reserves in the Bakassi area. The October 2002 International Court of Justice Decision facilitated the withdrawal of Nigeria from Bakassi on 14th August, 2008, through the instrumentality of the Nigeria-Cameroon Mixed Commission and the Greentree Accord.

In Cameroon, exists a Consul-General (since 1961) appointed by the Nigerian Government to safeguard Nigeria’s commercial and diplomatic interests as well as the welfare needs of her citizens living in the South West and North West Regions of Cameroon. From 1961 to 1968, the mission operated, simply, as a Consulate, headed by a Consul beginning with A.H. Ikwang (1961-1963) followed by S.T. King (1963-1965), R. Adibua (1965-1966), and Umaru Abdulla (1966-1968). In 1968, the Consulate was upgraded to the status of Consulate-General with K.J.N. Okpokam as the first Nigerian to be appointed in that capacity.

After the upgradation, Dr. Kenneth Nsor, 49, happens to be the 18<sup>th</sup> Consul-General of Nigeria to Cameroon, appointed in 2007. Summed up, he constitutes the 22<sup>nd</sup> consular emissary of Nigeria with jurisdiction over the two Anglophone sections (SW and NW Regions) of Cameroon. As Consul-General, he has been a principal actor in the events leading up to the handover of Bakassi to Cameroon as well as a key player in Bakassi in the areas of building post-conflict diplomatic bridges, positively bringing people together and giving them good food for thought.

After Bakassi’s retrocession to Cameroon, a new cordial spirit is embracing the Nigeria-Cameroon relations, as portrayed by Dr. Nsor. For purposes of expatiation, the **Bakassi Peace Letter** Editor, Jesse Konang, decided to meet him in his cosy consular office, near GRA Buea, for the following interview.

***To start with, Congratulations, Mr. Consul-General, on your country’s recent celebration of 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence from colonial rule. How was the Day celebrated in your area of competence?***

The celebration in my area of consular jurisdiction was organized at the level of the Consulate-General and at the level of the numerous Nigerian Union branches in the North-West and South-West Regions such as Bamenda, Limbe, Tiko, Mbonge, Mamfe, Kumba etc. At the Consulate, the celebration had two segments as follows: a cultural display-session for the Nigerian Community in our consular jurisdiction and a Dinner-session for the local administrative authorities and friends of Nigeria at the Residence of the Consul-General.

***What was so special about the celebrations vis-à-vis Nigeria-Cameroon relations?***

The specialty of the celebrations can be gleaned in the celebration of resilience, unity in diversity, democracy, human development, growth and the Nigerian renaissance. Nigeria has been able to survive her deep seated polarization through flexibility. In her relations with Cameroon, the celebration represents a resurgent and reinvigorated paradigm on which the two neighbours can carry the burden of history based on a shared race, historical experience and African brother/sisterhood.

***How involved were Cameroonians in the celebrations? How satisfied were you with their participation and interaction with their Nigerian counterparts on that day?***

The 50<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary celebration provided for Cameroonians in our area of consular jurisdiction the opportunity to re-live the over 40 years of their mandate experience. From Bamenda to Buea, Ngombe to Bakassi, Akwaya to Wum, Cameroonians joined in the celebration of Nigeria's Independence at the various branches of the Nigerian Union. At the Dinner in the Consul-General's residence, nearly 1000 invitees (including Cameroonians) were present while a good number of non invitees savoured the evening. I was completely humbled by their participation and interaction.

***The subject of Nigerians possessing residence permits in Cameroon usually takes up a lot of your time and energy during your public outings and speeches, to the extent that it is being construed as a clamour for your fellow Nigerians to be allowed to live freely in Cameroon. What really is the problem? Why do you keep raising it and to what extent have you dialogued with the local administrative authorities on the matter?***

Let me start by making it clear that Cameroon-Nigeria amity, although anchored on a shared destiny, is regulated by the values of a cherished sovereignty. On the basis of their sovereignty therefore, Cameroon and Nigeria reserve the right to determine who can enter or reside in each other's territory. For the avoidance of doubt, my job in Cameroon is to attend to the welfare of Nigerians living and doing business within my consular jurisdiction and intercede for them where their rights are denied them. This is exactly the same job performed by the Cameroon Consul in Calabar for Cameroonians in Nigeria. From the euphoric days of a newly won Independence, through the plebiscite and "Independence by joining" of British Southern Cameroon with *La Republic du Cameroun* to her advance to the Fourth Republic Nigeria has resonated powerfully in fulfilling a manifest destiny and a historic mission to keep African brother/sisterhood. In Bakassi, her relations with Cameroon represented a litmus test. Nigeria acceded to the ICJ judgment without bitterness. The about two million Cameroonian citizens in Nigeria have continued to live freely in Nigeria. Even where residency laws exist, the Nigerian authorities chose to pay a blind eye to these requirements.

While I do not advocate that Nigerians should be allowed to live freely in Cameroon, I have always called for positivism on the part of our Cameroonian hosts where the activities of local security officials such as mid-night raids (*Kale kale*), extortion, and forced renunciation of citizenship rights of children born of Nigerian parents, (in some cases with Cameroonian mothers). In the majority of cases, children who have not attained majority (21years) are forcibly made to inadvertently renounce their Cameroonian citizenship by forcing them to pay for residence permits.

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These issues are raised frequently because they constitute an integral part of my commission in Cameroon as Consul General. As regards dialogue, the issues have been cardinal at the Nigeria-

Cameroon Joint Commission as well as sessional meetings with local authorities. We have called for the mutual abrogation of residence permit because it constitutes the most potent irritant to the newfound relationship between our countries.

***How easy is it to enter and settle in Nigeria?***

Absolutely easy! Get yourself a passport, get to the border, get the passport stamped and enter Nigeria. Stay for the first 90 days without anyone asking you questions. After 90 days, regularize your stay by getting a residence permit. Note that the residence permit requirement is for foreigners who leave their country and go to Nigeria to stay, go to school or do business and not for those who are born in Nigeria. Being born in Nigeria automatically gives you a right of citizenship. Similarly, being born of one Nigerian parent makes you a Nigerian with all privileges attached.

***How would you assess the level of the return of peace and unity between Nigerians and Cameroonians living in the Bakassi Peninsula?***

Political and consular mutations in the Bakassi Peninsula are the result of the unfinished character of the peace efforts there. The security forces especially the Rapid Intervention Battalion and the Delta Force before them, have been essentially predatory and prebendal. The dangerous fault-line has been that, people of Nigerian extraction, born and bred in the Peninsula have lost hope in the potency of their inheritance, leading to the proliferation of transnational non-state actors such as the Bakassi freedom fighters. The net result is the emergence of a polycentric attitude which has done more to disconnect the ordinary Bakassi people, from other Cameroonians. There is therefore a legitimacy deficit in this relationship.

***Viewpoints expressed after Nigeria and Cameroon diplomatically settled their Bakassi border-dispute described the approach as a “world model”, a “remarkable experiment in conflict prevention”. As a seasoned diplomat, how advantageous is diplomacy to conflict resolution?***

Dialogue and compromise have been cardinal hallmarks of Diplomacy and Statesmanship. The resolution of the Bakassi dispute through diplomacy only confirms the regulatory capacity of state actors in the resolution of conflicts. Diplomacy can make us see things beyond the savage brutality of war, hunger, and crisis of legitimacy.

***How does Nigeria cooperate with Cameroon in taming the upsurge of pirate operations in and around the Bakassi Peninsula?***

I had noted clearly that piracy on the Peninsula has been a product of disillusionment on the part of the indigenous people. Note that one of the strategies of war is wooing the indigenous population and making them see wisdom in accepting an invading army. By so doing, the population will readily become a source of recruitment, a source of needed supplies, and indeed “a friend in need”. The security forces in Bakassi should therefore marry and love the population. It will be counter-productive to intimidate, extort, falsely arrest and imprison the locals on spurious charges such as espionage, and stubbornness. On the part of Nigeria, she has called for the formulation of rules of engagement for joint patrol of the Peninsula and currently awaits Cameroon’s reaction.

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***Are you happy working in Cameroon?***

Absolutely! Cameroon represents for me a second home. Do not forget, I hail from Ikom in Cross River State and share a close affinity with the Ejagham tribe in Cameroon. Serving in Cameroon has allowed me not only to bring to bear my cultural association with the people but has opened up new opportunities for Nigeria-Cameroon friendship. My tenure has witnessed great improvements in people-to-people relations, and on a personal note; I have been able to widen my circle of friends.

***What is your relationship with the Governors of the South West and North West Regions of Cameroon who contain your subjects?***

I must say I have worked very well with the Governors of the South West and North West Regions. In my first 2½ years, I worked with Governors Eyaya Zanga Louis in the South West and Koumpa Issa in the North West. Governor Ahmad Abkar took over in the North West while Koumpa Issa moved to the South West after a stint in the Centre Region. All these men are gentlemen of repute and integrity.

***The creation of the Bakassi Peace Letter was inspired by the appreciation shown by the national and international communities to see peace and social cohesion reign, eternally, in the Bakassi Peninsula. Thank God, you are one of the paper's ardent readers. To what extent can the paper rely on your Consulate for its sustainability and ability to cover the Bakassi Peninsula and its vicinity more intensively and extensively?***

The *Bakassi Peace Letter* has been a welcome addition to the literature on Bakassi especially in the post-conflict era. The Consulate-General of Nigeria will therefore continue to be a partner in this endeavour, and will be available whenever called upon to be of assistance in its engagements.

***Do you have any special peace-enhancing message/appeal to the people of Bakassi, Nigerians and Cameroonians alike?***

Much of the ground for the new rapprochement has been covered. What remains is for Nigeria and Cameroon to prudently employ their leverage to obtain accelerated justice, freedom, social provisioning and commitment to the peace of Bakassi. This is the job of the two governments, the people of Bakassi, Nigerians and Cameroonians alike.

***Thank you very much for talking to us.***

Thank you very much as well.