

GUARDIAN Friday, January 23, 2009

Obama: What next for the world and Africa? *By Bolaji Akinyemi*

ON the day of the United States election in November 2008, I published a piece titled "The Obama in us and the us in Obama" in which I sought to focus our minds on why the election of Obama was important to the world. Of course you are here to listen to members of the panel and not to me. But I cannot resist the temptation to make just a point.

More than at any time in recent history, an American President may in fact be the solution to economic problems in Nigeria because at this point in time, America and Nigeria face similar problems. Americans are out of employment just as Nigerians are out of employment. American businesses are collapsing just as Nigerian businesses such as the textile factories and motor assembly plants have collapsed.

Nigeria should borrow a leaf from the Obama economic recovery package. President-elect Obama has recognized that unemployment is a threat to the survival of the United States. The Nigerian Government should similarly recognize that unemployment is a national security concern. To that extent, firstly, Nigeria should appoint an Unemployment Czar with a mandate to create millions of jobs over the next two to three years. Nigeria presents an unparalleled opportunity for mass direct labor engagement. Secondly, Nigeria suffers from desert encroachment. Close to five hundred manual workers can be engaged for years in anti-desertification programmes.

Thirdly, Nigerian roads are in a state of total decay and neglect. Federal, State and Local Governments can employ close to a million men to patch potholes and engage in beautification of the environment. Fourthly, Nigeria is afflicted by a high state of insecurity, which should be addressed by getting more men and women into uniform. Laws go unenforced because the 350,000 men and women in the police force are inadequate. It is not more helicopters that the police need but more boots on the ground. Nigeria should have close to 1.5 million police personnel. In times of war, nations (Nigeria included) train soldiers in six to 12 weeks and send them to war. Nigeria is involved in a war against insecurity and we cannot afford the luxury of six months training programmes, as is still the norm with the Nigerian paramilitary organizations.

And that is also why I feel scandalized that institutions such as the police, customs, immigration and prison which are maintained at tax payers' expense will charge each applicant N5000 (about \$20) to pick up an application form. This is an illegal direct taxation on the poor and the President should put a stop to it immediately.

Fifthly, The Nigerian government at every level should embark on labor-intensive agriculture with free allocation of land, seed, fertilizer and guaranteed prices for products.

Sixthly, the government should initiate talks with the private sector towards reopening the motor assembly plants even if this means extending financial subsidy to them. Finally, 10 years ago, I proposed that government in partnership with the private sector should initiate a programme where businesses will employ three new employees at government expense to understudy each employee. I was dismissed as an economic lunatic. A few days ago, the British government announced that it was considering such a proposal to combat graduate unemployment. I suppose economic lunacy now has legitimacy and the Nigerian government would be well advised to take another look at the proposal.

If I may paraphrase and modify Dickens, it is the worst of times but it can be turned into the best of times. We can still turn adversity into opportunity. This is the time to dump monetarism and the values of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which have ruled the world since the 1980s and embrace Keynesianism. We must stop downsizing. We must increase employment opportunities. We must increase subsidies all across the board in agriculture, in aviation, in shipping, in education and in housing. The condition to be attached to the subsidy is that the economic activities generated must lead to massive employment and not be wasted on fat salaries and allowances for management and directors