
Nigeria: The Devastating Flames of Abacha Coal-Pots and the People's Forests

The political instabilities in Nigeria during Abacha's regime in 1993/94, which was an aftermath of the annulment of June 12, 1992 presidential election won by the late business mogul -Chief M.K.O. Abiola- created an acute scarcity of kerosene that was seriously felt in different parts of the country. The kerosene scarcity led to the invention of "Abacha Coal-Pot" – a locally made cooking stove that uses charcoal.

Over the years, the cooking technology Abacha Coal-Pot, has been widely accepted, and the use spread rapidly, due to incessant increases in the prices of kerosene and cooking gas. In Nigeria, the official price of kerosene per litre has been increased by more than 200% over the last decade and presently, it is sold at an unofficial price that is almost 100% more than the current official price of about US\$0.5. This ugly trend has given a boost to the charcoal trade in different parts of the country and now, the people's forests are suffering.

The charcoal business, which is about the most thriving business in Oke Ogun area of Oyo State -an area that houses the Old Oyo National Park- has extended to different parts of Kwara, Lagos, and Ogun States.

In Saki --an ancient town and the largest town in Oke Ogun area--, there is no street without a mega dealer who is patronized by wholesalers and retailers even from the neighbouring States. The business is getting so organized that different stakeholders have their associations. Presently, there are strong indications that the dealers have started exporting charcoal as trailers, carrying containers, now come to Saki to convey charcoal to Lagos, which is a coastal state. There is no doubt that this would spell further disaster for the forests of the area.

Unlike the land expropriation cases of the Twa in Rwanda, the Ogiek in Kenya, the Batwa in Uganda, the Amerindians in Guyana and the Suramaka in Suriname, this is a pathetic case where the people, aided by economic hardship orchestrated by insensitive administrations, are destroying their forests at an alarming and unprecedented rate.

The impacts, which traverse economic, social and environmental spheres, are quite enormous and devastating. The old-growth forests are almost gone and now, the attention of producers is shifting to previously less preferred species including exotics. The prices of wood-based products have increased tremendously over the last decade due to scarcity of wood. There is felt reduced food production as people have abandoned farming for the more lucrative charcoal business. The environment is seriously being polluted and there have been some cases of clashes due to illegal encroachment on other people's forests to cut wood for charcoal production.

To make the matter worse, the respective governments have not made and are not making concerted efforts to discourage or stop the trend. There are no serious enlightenment campaigns to educate and sensitize people especially on the environmental consequences of the charcoal business. While there is no deterrent legislation on the charcoal business in the affected States, Kwara State

--probably because of its fragile savanna vegetation--, had sometime announced a ban on the use of charcoal, though, this has not been enforced. The people insist that government should show seriousness on their own part by reducing the prices of kerosene and cooking gas.

As a result of the rapidly spreading nature of the cooking technology and the concomitant impacts on the environment, there is an urgent need for governments (Federal, State and Local) and the Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to intervene. Governments should come up with appropriate legislation to stop the use of Abacha Coal-Pots and charcoal business. For this legislation to work, governments should make kerosene and cooking gas affordable. NGOs and governments should provide households and other users of Abacha Coal-Pots with kerosene stoves and empower them to use them. Alternative means of livelihoods should also be provided for those that depend on the charcoal business especially the forest dwellers who produce or sell their trees to producers. More importantly, the degraded forests should be restored. The time to act is now! The devastating flames of Abacha Coal-Pots must be quenched to save the people's forests.

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