

## COMMUNIQUÉ

# Nigeria and the Biafra Agitation



**OBASANJO**, GCFR



**OKEKE**, OFR



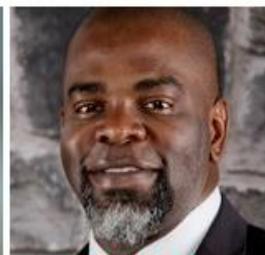
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January 15, 2016 | Yar'Adua Centre, Abuja | @Devtdiscourse | @NextierAdvisory | #OnBiafra1



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January 17, 2016

# Nigeria and the Biafra Agitation

## PREAMBLE

1. On Friday, January 15, 2016, Nextier Advisory<sup>1</sup>, through its public policy initiative (**developmentdiscourse™**) organised a public dialogue on Nigeria and the re nascent agitation for Biafra. The discourse was held at the Yar'Adua Centre in Abuja, Nigeria.
2. **Chief Olusegun Obasanjo**, GCFR (two-time President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) presented the keynote address. He subsequently joined a panel of discussants consisting of **Chief Simon Okeke**, OFR (former Chairman, Police Service Commission), **Tolu Ogunlesi** (West Africa Editor, The Africa Report), **Kadaria Ahmed** (Host "Straight Talk with Kadaria"), and **Chido Onumah** (Coordinator, African Centre for Media and Information Literacy). **Patrick O. Okigbo III** (Principal Partner, Nextier Advisory) moderated the session while **Jerome Okolo** (Executive Vice Chairman, GeoQinetiq Limited) was the compère.

## OBJECTIVES

3. This event, which is the first in a three-part public discussion series on the Biafra agitation, aimed to identify the root causes of the agitation and proffer solutions to diffuse the tension in a proactive and sustainable manner. The three-part public dialogue series planned from January to March 2016 is setup as follows:
  - #OnBiafra1 - January: **Cross-generational dialogue** across Nigeria's sub-nationalities
  - #OnBiafra2 - February: **Leaders of the various agitations** across Nigeria present their grievances and raison d'être
  - #OnBiafra3 - March: **Strong voices and public intellectuals** across Nigeria proffer well-considered solutions to the growing tensions across the country.
4. At the end of the three-part series, the various parties in the conflict would have gained a **deeper understanding of the issues** and the Federal Government of Nigeria will receive a suite of solutions that could help defuse the nationwide tension.

## OPENING REMARKS

5. The compère, Jerome Okolo, used his opening remarks to promote the idea of the **active citizen**, that is, people who challenge the status quo especially when it is not working in the best interest of the country. Active citizens are people who challenge existing mechanisms and structures to become more inclusive, fair and open, people who challenge other citizens to become better citizens.
6. In his keynote address titled, "**Resurgent Biafra Agitation: Born in Error, Ignorance and Frustration**", Chief Olusegun Obasanjo situated the increased agitation for Biafra in the outcome of the recent 2015 presidential elections. He argued that the South East did not support the candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari because he was erroneously cast as a "rabid Moslem fundamentalist". He cautioned that any agitation for war – whether for real or perceived injustice – is borne out of ignorance because "*No right-thinking person who has experienced the horror of war will ever agitate for more war*". Yet, he acknowledged

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<sup>1</sup> Nextier Advisory is a multi-competency public sector advisory firm with core competencies in policy research, strategy, finance, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic communications. Our principals have broad industry experience and deep expertise in agriculture, power and petroleum sectors. [www.nextierlimited.com](http://www.nextierlimited.com)

that the current agitation is really a cry of frustration from the teeming youths who look on the future with despair and uncertainty. He expressed suspicion that the leaders of the agitation intend to extract commercial or financial gains from their supporters and the government. He cited the issuance of the so-called Biafran travel passport for which unsuspecting people are being charged exorbitant prices. While calling on the leaders of the South East region to “*caution realism and sanity amongst the youths*”, he also called on President Buhari to “*prove that Nigeria is his constituency*”.

## KEY OUTCOMES

7. **Marginalisation:** Most of the agitators for the secession of Biafra from Nigeria point to a systematic marginalisation of Ndigbo by the government of Nigeria. A recent essay (“[What Do The Igbos Want](#)”)<sup>2</sup> outlines some of these claims. While Chief Obasanjo held that the allegations are spurious, Chief Simon Okeke and Chido Onumah held up the marginalisation argument. On the other hand, Kadaria Ahmed and Tolu Ogunlesi held the view that the political class marginalises everyone in Nigeria. According to Kadaria, the culprits are “*the thieving, greedy, ruling elite who have no interest at all in building a nation, because the minute they do, then basically they’re out of business*”. This disregard by the ruling elite is the real reason for the increasing agitation across Nigeria.
8. **The Pogrom:** The [1966 Anti-Igbo Pogrom](#)<sup>3</sup> remains one of the lingering pains and rallying point for those currently agitating for Biafra. Thousands of civilians from the Eastern part of Nigeria were killed in retaliation for the January 1966 coup that was a disagreement between politicians and the military. Many of the agitators believe that the Nigeria government of the time did not do enough to protect these victims. This sentiment is sustained every time Ndigbo (Nigerians of Igbo origin) are killed as part of any uprising especially in the Northern part of the country. There is a pervasive belief that the government has historically been remiss in protecting the well being of Igbo citizens. In the course of the discussion, it was suggested that an apology from the government for the 1966 Pogrom could assuage this pain, defuse the tension and facilitate national healing. Chief Okeke countered that mere words do not amount to much; rather, action is what is required from the government to show that Igbo lives matter and would be protected. Chief Obasanjo responded that, on the subject of the Pogrom, there were enough errors on both sides (Biafra and Nigeria) and that there may not be much value in apportioning blames. Rather, there is need to explore options to heal the wounds.
9. **Post-war: Almost Vanquished:** The agitators for a sovereign state of Biafra accuse the Nigerian government of an unwritten policy to pauperise the South East. Most of the agitators base their conclusions on three pivotal post-war events. Firstly, at the end of the war, every Igbo person who had a bank account in Nigeria before the War received **£20** from the Nigerian government, regardless of how much had been in the account. Many agitators for Biafra see this as an economic measure against Ndigbo even when the military war had ended and the government declared a reconciliatory policy of “No Victor, No Vanquished”. Secondly, the 1972 Nigeria Enterprises Promotion (Indigenisation) Decree was seen as a furtherance of the economic warfare on Ndigbo. The **Indigenisation Decree** led to the sale of foreign owned companies to Nigerians at a time when Ndigbo, who survived the war, were rebuilding their lives with just twenty pounds. Thirdly, the flight of Ndigbo back to their villages at the onset of the war was alleged to be an act of sabotage against the Nigerian state. As a result, any real estate properties they left behind were declared “**abandoned properties**” and with the backing of the Nigerian

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<sup>2</sup> Nwakanma, Obi (2016). “*What Do The Igbos Want?*”. Available at Vanguard newspaper website. <<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/01/what-do-the-igbo-want/>> (Updated 10<sup>th</sup> January 2016; accessed 10<sup>th</sup> January 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia (2016). 1966 anti-Igbo pogrom. Available on Wikipedia website. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966\\_anti-Igbo\\_pogrom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966_anti-Igbo_pogrom)> (Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2016)

government, confiscated by the indigenes. These properties remain under wrongful ownership even up to this day.

10. **The Unfinished Rs:** At the end of the Civil War, the government of Nigeria made a pledge to "**Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation**" (3Rs). The reconciliation seemed to have been achieved because nine years after the war an Igbo man, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, became Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. However, the two other Rs (Reconstruction and Rehabilitation) were never fully implemented. While the agitators for Biafra would proudly point to the fact that the South East was reconstructed through community efforts from the same Ndigbo who rebuilt their lives from £20, it remains a sour point for them that the Nigerian government failed to deliver on the promised reconstruction and rehabilitation. On this point, the panel discussed the possibility of a "South-East Development Commission" similar to what is currently being conceived under the Presidential Initiative for the North East to reconstruct and rehabilitate Nigerians impacted by the Boko Haram insurgency. A failure to attempt a belated reconstruction of the South East while reconstructing the North East only motivates agitators for Biafra to recruit support for their cause.
11. **Structure of Nigeria:** Most agitators for Biafra point to the fact that the **South East geopolitical region has only five states** while the North West has seven states and all other regions, six states. This misalignment impacts budgetary allocation to the region and also the number of people representing the region in the National Assembly. The panel acknowledged that this is a valid concern. However, the question is should the government implement the recommendation of the 2014 National Conference that required the creation of 18 additional states? Or, should Nigeria merge the states into a regional structure, as it appears that the states are not viable economic units?
12. **Referendum:** A majority of the panelists agree that giving the former Eastern region an **opportunity to decide** (through the polls like in the case of Scotland) whether to remain a part of Nigeria will help defuse the tension. However, Chief Obasanjo was opposed to the idea pointing out the significant difficulties in its implementation. For instance, should the states of the South South (that were part of the former Eastern Nigeria) be part of the referendum? He urged for new ideas on how to strengthen the unity of the country while ensuring that the country works for all Nigerians.
13. **Teaching History:** The panellists agreed that one of the reasons why the agitation for Biafra has subsisted half a century later is because the real, accurate, history of the Civil War is not taught in Nigerian schools. As a result, Nigerians have biased and sectional viewpoints on the War and these views shape their interaction with other Nigerians from different ethnic groups. To narrow this divide and form a more united country, there is need to **introduce the Biafran War history** (and indeed, Nigeria's history) in the school curriculum. This history could point to the conclusion that errors were made on both sides and that all sides lost in that war. More importantly, it would help ensure that Nigerians never choose war as an option for resolving difficult disagreements.
14. **National Identity:** Ms. Kadaria Ahmed, along with the other panelists, stressed on the need for the government of Nigeria to take actions that would focus on the **things that unite the country** as opposed to those that highlight our differences. It was also suggested that the government initiates programs and events that foster a sense of belongingness and national unity among Nigerians. For instance, fifty years after the war, Nigeria has lost many opportunities to create programmes that will help forge a common identity for Nigerians. For example, the Federal Government should have used the day of this event (January 15<sup>th</sup> 2016, which is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nzeogwu Coup) to convene a national dialogue or a series of events on national building and fostering a national identity. Instead, events commemorating the coup were held in the various

regions (Kaduna, Lagos, etc.) and could deepen the sectional nature of discussions and debates about Nigeria.

**15. Question the Regional Governments:** While the Panel agreed that the agitation is borne mostly out of frustration that Nigeria has failed the youth; it agrees that secession may not necessarily be the most optimal solution. It pointed to the fact that the states in the South East region (or indeed in all the other regions of Nigeria) have earned the confidence of their indigenes. Some of the passion exhibited by the agitators for Biafra could be well spent also challenging the state governments in the South East (and across Nigeria) to deliver more positive outcomes for the people.

## Conclusion

**16. Violence is not the solution:** At the end of the discussion, it was agreed that a call for violence is not a sustainable solution to the frustrations that trigger the agitation. Rather, there is need for more equitable distribution of the nation's resources with more emphasis on ensuring that government resources are invested in such a manner that they create hope and a viable future for Nigeria and all its citizens.

## Next Steps

17. #OnBiafra1 is first of a three-part series on the Biafra agitation. This event aimed to highlight the key reasons for the agitation and the need for continued dialogue on this issue.
18. #OnBiafra2, the second part of the series, which will be held in February 2016, will involve leaders of the various agitation groups to highlight their grievances and expectations from the government. These groups that will be invited to the event will include but would not be limited to Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Oodua People's Congress (OPC), and Arewa Youths Council.
19. Nextier Advisory and **developmentdiscourse**<sup>™</sup> encourages you to remain a part of these discussions with the hope of a viable and sustainable solution for the sovereignty of Nigeria.



**Nextier Advisory** is a multi-competency public sector advisory firm with core competencies in research, strategy, finance, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic communications. Our consultants bring deep knowledge of their industries; deliver rigorous analysis, and present pragmatic solutions to produce practical, sustainable, and high impact results. Whether it is an elected official

looking to solve the poverty challenge, a government agency looking to achieve operational excellence or increase internally generated revenue, or an international investor seeking opportunities in the Nigeria, Nextier delivers sustained impact. Nextier has its main office in Abuja.



**Development Discourse** is a platform for reform-minded public sector professionals (at the highest levels of policy development and programme implementation) to engage in rigorous dialogue on pragmatic solutions to Nigeria's

most critical development challenges. Development Discourse aims to nurture a network that facilitates individual performance and collaboration across the public sector.

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