

# **NIGERIA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN WEST AFRICA (1985 – 1993)**

*Dr. Lambert Uyi Edigin and Collins Osayuki Edigin*

## **Abstract**

General Ibrahim Babangida's regime has generally been described as Afro-centric in view of Nigeria's concentration on African affairs. When Babangida came to power on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1985, he promised that African problems shall constitute the premise of Nigeria's foreign policy. Also, during the Silver Jubilee Anniversary of the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) in 1988, he called on the organization to take keen interest in the political and socio-economic development of the continent. This paper concentrates on Babangida's Nigeria foreign relation in West Africa with particular reference to the Liberian crisis. The Liberian crisis was the most intensive peace initiative. It was instrumental to the establishment of the ECOWAS cease fire monitoring group in the Liberian crisis as well as other trouble spots in West Africa. The paper concludes that the Babangida regime recorded the strongest foreign policy initiative in the West African sub-region than any other Nigerian post independence Head of government.

## **Introduction**

The Babangida regime was welcomed with great anticipation. This was especially due to the harsh and draconian excesses of the preceding Buhari regime. The Babangida regime thus, began its tenure with massive stock of goodwill and an attempt at moving away from the acute xenophobia of his predecessor. The proximate neighbours in West Africa were particularly delighted when he began to distance his regime from that of his predecessor that had literally destroyed the economies of the immediate neighbours.

The regime's sub-regional diplomacy in West Africa can be located within the overall context of the country's declared Afro-centric policy in general and sub-regional integration in particular. It was in pursuit of the objective of making the West Africa sub-region safe for Nigeria, that the country got involved in Burkina-Faso in 1986. This was over a mineral rich strip of land that had been the subject of dispute for many years (Akinade, 1988:25).

This conflict found the then foreign affairs minister, Prof. Akinyemi engaging in Nigeria's own version of "shuttle diplomacy" visiting Libya, Mali, Burkina-Faso and Senegal within a few days of the outbreak of the conflict to arrange an immediate cease-fire and set the two countries to refer the dispute to an ad-hoc committee of the Organization of African Unity for final resolution. Getting involved in such a mediatory effort also helped to project Nigeria's claim to leadership in the sub-region.

*Dr. Lambert Uyi Edigin and Collins Osayuki Edigin*

In general, the Babangida regime made conscious efforts to normalize damaged relations with many of the neighbouring states in West Africa. This was perhaps, a sensible thing to do considering the harsh treatment that the preceding Buhari regime had subjected them to by the closure of the borders and the sudden currency change succeeding in virtually wrecking the economies of some of the states, particularly those like Chad, Niger Republic and Benin that were dependent on Nigeria for survival. Babangida moved swiftly to sooth their wounds through offers of assistance.

The goodwill of the Babangida's regime with the ECOWAS community caused the leaders of the sub-region to elect Babangida as ECOWAS chairman for three conservative years, 1985, 1986 and 1987, an action unprecedented since the organization came into existence in 1975.

Babangida used the position of his chairmanship in making Ghana's leader, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings to pay his first visit to the neighbouring Togo. This was a means of strengthening both countries' economic and political relationships. In the words of Ibrahim Babangida, "this statement, like the gesture of yours (Rawlings) will forever be cherished by all who desire to see the dreams of ECOWAS become a reality" (Ede, 1988:104). Babangida contributed towards ECOWAS when he postulated that the trade liberalization scheme and sub-regional common market should be built so that ECOWAS could be recognized as a regional force. He also denied ECOWAS member states the opportunity to earn revenue, that created an underground economy which ran parallel to West African economies, that undermines the collective efforts to integrate our economies and derive the full benefit of trade.

He also with other leaders, argued that there are far too many cases of unnecessary harassments and other inconveniences meted out to citizens travelling within the region. He was also able to convince ECOWAS leaders to mandate the executive secretariat to convene a meeting of internal affairs ministers and of state security officials to eliminate all obstacles to the implementation of the protocol on free movement of persons, the right of residence and establishment.

In the same vein, in the ministerial council of June 1989, Nigeria informed the meeting that she will make a payment of \$1.8m, partly to meet its statutory contributions as well as for the funding and the construction of the community's Abuja headquarters. In the 13<sup>th</sup> summit of ECOWAS 1990, President Ibrahim Babangida made a proposal for a standing mediatory committee. This proposal was adopted by members of the committee consisting of Togo, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Gambia. (Ede, 1988:188)

### **Nigeria and Peaceful Settlement of Disputes in West Africa**

In the past years, Nigeria has been interested in the Chadian crisis. Nigeria's direct mediatory involvement in Chad began when she agreed to host the first Kano peace talk in March 1979. This was later followed by the second Kano talks in April 1979 and the three Lagos national reconciliation conferences. Nigeria was able to persuade president Felix Malloun N'Gakov Tou Bey-Ndi to agree to step down so that peace would return to Chad and at the same time, Nigeria granted him asylum.

Nigeria in March 1978, sent 1,000 Nigerian peace keeping troops which were led by Colonel Mohammadu Magoro to Ndjamena Chad. These troops were to serve as a buffer force between warring frontline troops and the Chadian National Army (Orobator, 1996:93).

Nigeria has spent the sum of \$59.8 million on the multi-lateral peace-keeping activities in Chad. Ironically with this huge spending, she seems to have lost credibility and the power to effectively dictate who remains in power in Ndjamena.

By the above involvement of Nigeria towards Chad, when Babangida came into power in Nigeria, Nigeria's relations did not go further than its predecessor. In February 1986, following the upsurge of crisis in Chad, Nigeria made strong unequivocal diplomatic pronouncements condemning the crisis. The then Nigeria's External Affairs Minister, Bolaji Akinyemi speaking in a peace mission in Paris, said "Nigeria could not tolerate the civil war in neighbouring Chad any longer". According to him, "the feelings of the government are that this time, it has got to stop" (Orobator, 1996:94).

The minister also said that Nigeria's ultimate aim was to get all the parties involved in the Chadian civil strife to a round table peace conference. In another light, Nigeria's position in the crisis has also been that the Chadian problem should be left with the Chadians to solve with perhaps, the assistance of well-meaning and concerned Africans to the exclusion of foreign military intervention. This stance has been re-affirmed by the External Affairs Minister's statement that "the Federal Military Government is continuing its diplomatic contact with all concerned parties because it still believes that the solution to the Chadian conflict is political and not military" (Ogwu, 1996:53).

### **Nigeria and Unity amongst West African Nations**

On July 20<sup>th</sup> 1989, Babangida and other Heads of State under the auspices of O.A.U held a meeting between President Hissene Habrer of Chad and Libyan leader Col. Mormer Al-Kadhafi in Bamako, Mali, for the restoration of diplomatic relations and peace. The meeting took place against the background of reports that Libya was arming anti-babre dissidents who were preparing to launch attacks on Chad from the Darfur region of western Sudan.

The issue of inter-border clashes between African countries contributed much to the disunity amongst African nations than often acclaimed outside intrusion. It was in realization of the direct need to maintain unity and peace along our borders that General Ibrahim Babangida undertook a tour of Benin Republic where a number of measures to ensure peace between the two countries especially along their borders were undertaken. Also, it was the recurring border clashes, particularly between the nomadic Fulani and the local farmers which may jeopardize the peaceful co-existence and good neighbourliness between the two countries that prompted President Babangida and his counterpart Matthew Kerekou to propose a meeting to prevent the clashes (Idisi and Idise, 1996:173)

There was also the Nigeria-Niger border co-operation workshop in Badagry, July 10, 1989. The outcome of the workshop was a call that both governments should demarcate their common borders precisely and to use such demarcation as a bridge between them and not as a barrier. There was also the acceptance from both countries to co-operate with one another in creating viable projects that would facilitate and promote social and economic development for Nigeria and Niger. They also made plans for the need to promote industrial development within the framework of the Nigeria/Niger joint commission for co-operation.

### **Intervention, Peacekeeping and Peace-Enforcement in Liberia**

Nigeria became actively involved in the Liberian crisis when it spearheaded an ECOWAS military intervention ostensibly carried out to help resolve the crisis. The Liberian conflict had begun a year earlier in December 1989 when Charles Taylor led a group of insurgents to invade Liberia and attempted to remove the regime of President Samuel Kanyon Doe which begun as an insurrection by a small band of guerrillas and had by mid-1990 escalated into a full-blown civil war threatening the stability and survival of the Liberian state and posing dangers to the rest of the sub-region by way of refugee influx into the neighbouring states. It was apparently to curb this menace that General Babangida got the Economic Community of West African States to consider deploying a sub-regional peace keeping force into Liberia in August 1990. Thus, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 1990, ECOMOG entered into Liberia confronted with the uphill tasks of restoring peace, establishing an interim government and rehabilitating destroyed essential services (Akpotor and Nwolise, 1990:100).

This Babangida initiative has been criticized by many Nigerians because of the scale of involvement, particularly in a period of economic crisis, when “Economic Diplomacy”, could do the magic rather than full financial involvement. However, on the government’s side, it was an attempt to correct the mistakes of the past, of Nigeria’s giant status without actual powers. That is, an attempt at asserting Nigeria’s presence and importance in the sub-region, as well as providing the irrelevance of the non-intervention principle of our foreign policy.

*Nigeria's Foreign Relations In West Africa (1985 – 1993)*

Thus, in a meeting with the Sierra Leone special envoy, Dr. Sheka Kenu on 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1990, General Babangida reiterated Nigeria's concern over the Liberian crisis and declared that the country was anxious for immediate steps to be taken to avert more bloodshed. He consequently called for a meeting of the 5- member ECOWAS standing mediation committee which he sponsored through at the Banjul summit to deal with the Liberian situation. At the end of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1990 was a peace agenda of convening a meeting of the warring parties that would initial a ceasefire agreement and the holding of free and fair elections with the participation of all shades of political expression in the country drawn up (Moyosore, 1990:64).

With the carnage continuing unabated, as a result of conflicts in the ranks of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the breakaway faction, the Independent National Patriotic Saint of Liberia (INPSL) led by Prince Yormie Johnson, the mediation committee (of which Nigeria was a member) felt it had no choice than to send troops to separate the combatants. Although the peace force was conscripted from the ranks of the member states of the mediation committee as well as from Sierra Leone, Nigeria provided the bulk of its members. It was Gen. Arnold Quianoo (a Ghanaian commander) who headed the ceasefire force at the initial stage of the mission and was later replaced by a Nigerian field commander, General Joshua Dogonyaro. Infact subsequent ECOMOG field commanders were Nigerians.

Many people viewed the ECOMOG operation as an undue disobedience of the international law of non-interference in the internal affairs of Liberia by the mediation committee members and Nigeria in particular. It was argued that apart from being enshrined in the UN charter, both the O.A.U and ECOWAS recognized the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other states.

From the government circle, a statement came. In a press briefing, Admiral Augustus Aikhomu (V.P) emphasized the country's obligations and responsibilities (as a regional leader) in the sub-region, that by virtue of its position, Nigeria could not stand idly by in the face of events of epic proportions such as the one in Liberia. "That the government originally perceived the crisis as an internal one, but when it degenerated into almost senseless killing with a possible invitation for massive extra-continental interference and destabilization of the sub-region, intervention by Nigeria and its ECOWAS partners became an urgent necessity and indeed a responsibility". According to him, the purpose of the intervention was:

- (a) to bring the carnage to a halt;
- (b) to intervene in the fighting between the forces, separate the belligerents and establish a cease fire; and
- (c) to restore law and order in the country and help to restore an interim government which will, in due course, work out the necessary arrangements and facilitates agreeable solution to the principal actors and

*Dr. Lambert Uyi Edigin and Collins Osayuki Edigin*

a return to normal and democratic government in Liberia (Aikhomu, 1990).

General Babangida joined to give a similarly spirited defense and re-emphasized Nigeria's responsibility to the sub-region. He said that when events which are bound to affect Nigeria's politico-military and socio-economic environment are at stake, the country should "not stand by as helpless and hopeless spectators" (Akpotor and Nwolise, 1990:101). He debunked arguments challenging the illegality of ECOMOG and ECOWAS intervention in Liberia by referring to article 52 of the UN charter providing for regional security, arrangements to complement the work of the world body itself. He said his government was not interested in "capturing" Liberia, "for who" he asked and that ECOWAS responsibilities were two-fold; protective and promotional, and inherently in the interest of all Liberians and humanity. On the threat to ECOWAS, he said there was no real threat to the cohesion of the sub-regional body and that for real unity to occur, the body must be able to stand any strain to its cohesion, otherwise, whatever unity currently existing would be fragile and subject to disintegration.

The role of Nigeria in Liberia has tended to drive and divide scholars into two large contending positions. There are those who contend that Nigeria's role in Liberia was illogical while some others are vigorously in support of Nigeria's involvement in the Liberian crisis. Those who belong to the first school of thought believe that the Nigerian effort in Liberia was a waste of resources considering the crippling domestic economy. Those of the second school believe that Nigeria's involvement in the crisis was a logical outcome of the country's sincere desire to facilitate the defense of the territorial integrity of all African states. Thus, the country's position was equally rationalized as a deliberate attempt to prevent the escalation of the conflict to the extent that it might attract foreign intervention.

In the words of Ibrahim Bahangida, "Nigeria cannot fold its arms and stand back while the Liberian crisis continued to claim more lives and also increasingly turned into an excuse for foreign intervention in African affairs" (Akpotor and Nwolise, 1990:104).

Apart from the above, there is the contention that Nigeria as a country reserved the right to protect the lives and properties of her citizens that had become trapped in Liberia while the war raged on as only two alternatives became open to Nigeria. These were that of bringing back her citizens or ensuring peace in Liberia. The latter option seemed most appropriate to the government considering the monumental shape the war assumed in the wake of the year 1990.

### *Nigeria's Foreign Relations In West Africa (1985 – 1993)*

Furthermore, the war in Liberia if allowed unchecked, could create a problem of refugee influx into Nigeria. In other parts of the world, refugees have been known to troop in their thousands to neighbouring countries for safety, and there was nothing, to suggest that the Liberian crisis was not going to leave Nigeria in a similar situation. Thus, the government had the alternative of either folding its arms allowing the Liberian crisis to continue or intervening in the crisis. The last option seemed most practical and realistic at the time.

Despite the above explanations, many scholars have found it very difficult to accept the arguments of this school of thought. To them, there were other reasons remote from the above. The Babangida-Doe friendship school of thought contends that Nigeria was plunged into the Liberian crisis by the then President Ibrahim Babangida who was greatly disturbed by the threat to the rulership of his personal friend Samuel Doe and his life. While the contention that Babangida and Doe were friends before the out-burst of crisis may be a difficult thing to dismiss, it is however, arguable whether this was the singular reason why Babangida decided to vigorously pursue the resolution of the Liberian crisis. Firstly, ECOMOG certainly outlived Doe and his friend, Babangida. If the sole aim of ECOMOG was to preserve Doe in power, then one can logically contend that they could have withdrawn from Liberia after the death of Doe, this, they did not do. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, before his death, Doe had turned against ECOMOG when he realized that it was a neutral force.

Another school of thought that is supportive of Nigeria's involvement in Liberia is the prestige school of thought. It contends that as a leading power in the West-African sub-region, Nigeria has a duty to ensure peace in the region. Furthermore, as a leading member of ECOWAS, Nigeria must take bold initiatives to ensure peaceful resolution of the Liberian crisis if she must retain her prestige and dignity in the West African sub-region. Finally, if the growing French influence in the sub-region must be effectively checked, the Liberian crisis represents an opportunity for Nigeria to re-assert her dominant position in the region. True from this school of thought, Nigeria's involvement in ECOMOG is aimed at boosting her prestige and external image.

It is pertinent to point out that what actually began as a pan-West African effort because the ECOWAS authority endorsed it to restore peace to Liberia eventually became a Nigerian operation. The image of Nigeria loomed large in terms of military and civilian personnel, materials and funding for the operation. It however, encountered serious opposition and frustration in the hands of Code d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, both Francophone states that resented Nigeria's alleged hegemonic status in the sub-region.

The Liberian operation was still on by the time General Babangida left office in August 1993. The ECOMOG adventure during this period could be said to not actually have achieved its objective of restoring peace but it can still be

*Dr. Lambert Uyi Edigin and Collins Osayuki Edigin*

regarded as a qualified success. It demonstrated Nigeria's capacity and readiness to rise up to the occasion when circumstances required and stamped her authority more prominently on the affairs of the sub-region more than ever before. The succeeding Abacha regime inherited the operation and saw it to a conclusion. Nigeria's intervention therefore, led to the conduct of an internationally supervised general election in 1999.

### **Conclusion**

General Ibrahim Babangida's regime (1985 – 1993) has generally been described as Afro-centric in view of Nigeria's concentration on African affairs. This paper traces Nigeria's foreign relations with particular emphasis on the West African sub-region. When General Babangida came to power on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1985, he promised that African problem shall constitute the premise of Nigeria's foreign policy. Also, during the Silver Jubilee anniversary of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1988, he called on the organization to take keen interest in the political and economic development of the continent.

On conflict resolution, the regime in the spirit of the OAU sent troops to many troubled spots in West Africa and recorded the most intensive peace initiative in Liberia including the establishment of the ECOWAS ceasefire monitoring group in the Liberian crisis. At the 13<sup>th</sup> Summit of ECOWAS held in Banjul, Gambia in May 1990, Babangida proposed the setting up of a standing mediation committee to be charged with the responsibilities of addressing conflict situation in the sub-region. All in all, the Babangida regime recorded the strongest foreign policy initiatives in the West African sub-region than any other Nigerian post independence Head of government.

### **References**

- Aikhomu, Augusts (1990). On the Liberian crisis, being the text of a press briefing at the State House, Lagos.
- Akinande, Soji (1988). Shuttle Diplomacy *Newswatch*, August 29.
- Akpotor, S.A. & Nwolise, B.O. (1990). *Revolving Issues in Nigeria's Foreign Policy*; Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd.
- Ede, O. (1988). *Nigeria's external relations*, Ibadan: University Press.

*Nigeria's Foreign Relations In West Africa (1985 – 1993)*

Idisi, Christie & Idise George (1996). *Dynamic cases in international Relations*; Benin City; UTO Publications.

Moyosore, T. (1990), Nigeria's Historic Mission in Africa. *Nigerian forum, NIIA*, Lagos: January/February, vol.10, Nos. 1 and 2

Ogwu, Joy, (1996). *Nigerian foreign policy*; Lagos: Macmillan Nigerian Publishing Co. Ltd.

Orobator, S. E. (1996). *Political conflicts and crisis in Africa*; Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation.