

# The press and Nigeria's isolationist foreign policy (1993-1998)

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**Abstract.** Gen. Sani Abacha took over from Chief Ernest Shonekan's interim government which was formed when Gen Ibrahim Babangida "stepped aside". On assumption of office, Abacha was faced with the imminent disintegration of the country caused by the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, widely believed to have been won by the late businessman, Chief M. K. O. Abiola. Also, threatening the administration was the activities of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) both at home and abroad. The main objective of this study was to find out how the press covered Nigeria's foreign policy within 1993-1998. The study involved content analysis, historical and case study designs. The instrument for data collection included content analysis of newspaper contents library material related to the subject matter. The sampling technique used for the study is the purposive sampling, involving all the newspaper stories, features, opinion articles on the subject matter. The population included all newspaper stories published on Abacha's regime within the period of 1993-1998. A total sampling size of 56 news stories, articles and features were selected purposively through the constructed weeks based on two days interval. Four national newspapers, namely, The Guardian, This Day, the Vanguard and the Post Express were used. From the findings of the study we concluded that press reports on the examined foreign policy did not make much impact on the outcome of these foreign policy issues since the military regime in power never wanted opposition or criticisms. Therefore, the regime went ahead to isolate itself from main stream international politics and the press was helpless due to the fear of being gagged or proscribed as was the practice of the Abacha's administration. However, the press assumed a patriotic posture in her support for the regime's approach to Bakassi Peninsula dispute between Nigeria and Cameroun. Also the issue of peace keeping in the sub-region got the strong approval of the Nigerian press, even when a cross section of Nigerian citizens were skeptical about the regime interventionist policy in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

**Keyword:** Nigeria; Foreign policy; Press; Isolationism.

**Resumo.** *A imprensa e a política externa isolacionista da Nigéria (1993-1998).* O general Sani Abacha assumiu o governo

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interino do chefe Ernest Shonekan, que foi formado quando o general Ibrahim Babangida “afastou-se”. Ao assumir o cargo, Abacha enfrentou a iminente desintegração do país causada pela anulação da eleição de 12 de junho de 1993, amplamente considerada como vencida pelo falecido empresário, Chefe M.K.O. Abiola. Além disso, ameaçavam o governo as atividades da Coalizão Democrática Nacional (NADECO) tanto no país quanto no exterior. O principal objetivo deste estudo foi descobrir como a imprensa cobriu a política externa da Nigéria em 1993-1998. O estudo envolveu análise de conteúdo, desenhos históricos e estudos de caso. O instrumento de coleta de dados incluiu a análise de conteúdo do material da biblioteca de conteúdos de jornais relacionados à temática. A técnica de amostragem utilizada para o estudo é a amostragem intencional, envolvendo todas as matérias de jornal, matérias, artigos de opinião sobre o assunto. A população incluiu todas as notícias de jornais publicadas sobre o regime de Abacha no período de 1993-1998. Um tamanho total de amostra de 56 notícias, artigos e recursos foram selecionados propositalmente construídos com semanas de intervalo de dois dias. Foram utilizados quatro jornais nacionais, nomeadamente, The Guardian, This Day, Vanguard e Post Express. A partir das constatações do estudo, concluímos que a reportagem da imprensa sobre a política externa examinada não teve muito impacto sobre o resultado desta, uma vez que o regime militar no poder nunca quis oposição ou críticas. Portanto, o regime foi em frente para se isolar das principais correntes políticas internacionais e a imprensa estava desamparada devido ao medo de ser amordaçada ou proscrita como era a prática da administração de Abacha. No entanto, a imprensa assumiu uma postura patriótica em seu apoio à abordagem do regime à disputa da Península de Bakassi entre a Nigéria e Camarões. Além disso, a questão da manutenção da paz na sub-região obteve a aprovação da imprensa nigeriana, mesmo quando um grupo de cidadãos nigerianos estava céptico sobre a política intervencionista do regime em Serra Leoa e na Libéria.

**Palavras-chave:** Nigéria; Política estrangeira; Imprensa; Isolacionismo.

## Introduction

Gen. Sani Abacha took over from Chief Ernest Shonekan's interim government which was formed when Gen Ibrahim Babangida “stepped aside”. On assumption of office, Abacha was faced with the imminent disintegration of the country caused by the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, widely believed to have been won by the late businessman, Chief M.K.O. Abiola. Also, threatening the administration was the activities of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) both at home and abroad. Against the background that Abacha's foreign policy issues included the protection of the national security, prosperity, prestige and peace therefore, Abacha's regime spent a lot of resources, time and opportunities trying to curtail or fight the supposed enemies of the administration. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to an articulate and purposeful

foreign policy by the regime, except for image laundry and reactionary policies and moves aimed at castigating the West for being against Abacha's regime.

With the imprisonment of purported coup plotters, including the former Head of State, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo (who later emerged as civilian president in 1999), and the consequent hanging of the Ogoni Environmental Activists including the Playwright, Ken Saro Wiwa, the image of Abacha's regime got so bad both locally and internationally. In reaction to the murder of the Ogoni activists, Nigeria was suspended from commonwealth and other European countries imposed partial or full sanctions on the country. Also, USA withdrew military ties with the country. Faced with this number of hostility, Abacha sort for friendship with China and the other Asian Tigers (South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Indonesia). However, Abacha may have recorded some positive achievements in foreign policy, including the normalization of full-relation with South Africa after the election of the first black President, the late Nelson Mandela.

Again, Abacha through ECOMOG restored the democratically-elected President of Sierra Leone, who was ousted in a military coup led by Major Koromah. The Issue of Nigeria's permanent membership of Security Council was pursued with vigor by Abacha's regime. Even though Babangida started the ECOMOG mission in Liberia, Abacha's regime concluded the process by conducting elections that led to the enthronement of democracy in that country with the election of former rebel leader Charles Taylor as the President<sup>1</sup>.

Commenting on Abacha's foreign policies, Akinterinwa (1998) notes thus: "To a great extent, foreign policy under General Sani Abacha was more reactionary than programmed, it should be seen as reactive programme". But Akinterinwa feels that this is so because the domestic foundation of the foreign policy during Abacha era was characterized by political bricks of confusion and discords. He states that the regional success of the administration in terms of ECOMOG operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone were diversionary and uncalled for (ThisDay, June 22, 1998, p.10).

However, since Nigeria was accused of Human Rights abuses, the international community decided to distance itself from the country. But in order to deal with hostility, Abacha's confrontational posture. "Nigeria's foreign policy under General Abacha could not be objectively appreciated. The people were hostile to the country's foreign policy initiatives". Hence Niger's interventions in the crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone were seen as unwarranted: Educational Problem, poor infrastructure, poverty, high infant mortality, energy crisis, etc were issues that Nigerians believed should have attracted greater attention and funding by the government as a mark of government's concern for the people". The question is what role did they play under such circumstance in reporting and mainstreaming Nigeria's foreign policy? This is the trust of this study.

### **Statement of the problem**

How did the press report about Nigeria's foreign policy strategies during the Abacha's regime. This is because one of the most controversial aspects of Sani Abacha's administration was his foreign policies. Practically, every foreign policy initiative of the administration was met with scathing attacks both from within and outside the country. Hence, internal affairs of the country during Abacha's regime received worldwide attention scrutiny and sometimes, condemnation (Abudu, 1997, p. 35).

Hence, Abacha made no secret of the intention of his regime to cultivate new relationship with countries of the East. Such moves culminated in the visit of the Chinese Vice President Mr. Li Peng to the country in May 11, 1997. China thereafter, signed four

<sup>1</sup>Note: Charles Taylor was later judged and imprisoned by the faced war crime tribunal for war crimes committed against Sierra Leone by sponsoring rebel activities in that country; in the end of his administration.

agreements on power, steel, oil industries and rail transportation with the country. During Abacha's regime, government officials paid several visits to China for different trade and business links, including the rehabilitation of Nigeria's railway system. China was not alone in the 'trade relations' with Nigeria, Poland also entered into an impressive trade relationship with the country during Abacha's regime, especially in the area of maritime industries.

Therefore, two schools of thought emerged on Abacha's foreign policy strategies. The first school of thought was made up of the conservatives, who felt Nigeria should not antagonize her former friends. This group is represented by the views of Ambassador Oladipo Fafowora and Dr. Mathew Mbu, a former External Affairs Minister (The Guardian, September 18, 1997). Others identified as the conservative school of thought proponents are former Foreign Affairs Minister, Joseph Garbs and the late Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, a former Health Minister.

The other school of thought who are in the minority can be regarded as the radicals or reformists group. Writing on The Guardian of (February 10, 1997, p.10) noted that Ambassador Isaac Sagay displayed what Abugu Ike called "uncommon pragmatism" when he stated that: *"For we knew that when the chips are down, nations abandon the veneer of friendship for the sanctuary of permanent interests and therefore put on their blind folds to shut out any other counter veiling interest"*.

The main objective of this study was to find out how the press covered Nigeria's foreign policy within 1993-1998. The other specific objectives are:

1. To find out the contribution of press reports to foreign policy issues within the period of the study;
2. To identify the dominant foreign policy issues that attracted the attention of the press within such period;
3. To examine the directionality, story types (unit of analysis) and content categories of the foreign policy issues covered by the press within the period under review.

The following research questions were used in eliciting answers to the problem:

**RQ1:** What were the dominant foreign policy issues reported by the press during the period under review?

**RQ2:** what were the thrust of press contributions to Nigeria's foreign policy issues during the period under review?

**RQ3:** What were the directionality, story types and content categories of the foreign policy issues covered by the press within the period under review?

### **Perspectives on Abacha's foreign policies**

Olasebikan Tunji, writing on Abacha's foreign policy stated *inter alia*: Chief Tom Ikimi's coming as Foreign Affairs Minister in 1995 clearly defined the nation's foreign policy interest based on the circumstances of the period as:

- (i) Promotion of peace in West African sub-region and at the continental, as well as, global levels;
- (ii) Respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations;
- (iii) An uncompromising posture to imperialistic design to undermine the nations of Africa, particularly, Nigeria (ThisDay, October 7, 1998; p.19).

To Olasebikan, *"Nigeria under Abacha stood resolutely against injustice to Blackman just like the Murtala/Obasanjo regime made us proud by telling off the imperialists and by nationalizing the interests of British Petroleum in the Country"* (The Guardian, July, 20, 1996). Writing in an essay entitled 'The Nigerian Press and Abacha', in The Guardian

(Sunday Sept. 27, 1998; p.15), Charles Chukwunuoju Ojugbana wrote, *"But the real confusion which must surely stare every Nigerian in the face today is the fact the press, more than anybody or institution, contributed greatly to the later manifestations of heavy handedness and even the self-succession bid of Gen Sani Abacha in the later years of his reign. The press especially the opposition press must be held partly responsible for the actions of Gen. Sani Abacha in the last three years before his death on June 8, 1998"*. Ojugbana, however notes the consistency and tenacity of some Nigerian Newspapers and Magazines. The Guardian, Punch, and Thisday Group of Newspapers as well as Tell, The News and Tempo Magazines were identified as being constant, because, they stood out during this period in their position on issues without undue vacillation.

### **The press and Abacha's foreign policy shift**

Ike Abugu, writing on the Nigeria's new diplomacy, in the (The Guardian, September 1997, p.35) felt that there is nothing wrong in Abacha's regime chanting a new course for the national foreign policy. To him, the new found love with the countries in Asia is in line with the new world order which now emphasizes multi-polar world which is characterized by interdependence among all the power centers of the world, hence, "the idea of a single super power is more in theory and propaganda than practice and reality". To him, rapprochement with the East and maintaining cordial relations with West are two mutually exclusive processes. They are not and need not be China and Russia (*Easterners*) as well as France (*Westerner*) who are currently enjoying very warm relations with us. Abugu felt that our relationship with China and Russia was in order, after all, they are members of Security Council. Quoting Dr. Henry Kissinger, Abugu said, Russia, according to Kissinger will return to 'major international role, after many ups and downs'.

Admittedly, China for the past three decades has had the world's fastest growing economy and if growth rate then was projected into the future, the Chinese economy was to overtake that of the United States in less than 20 years Abugu noted, quoting the London-based publication. However, some people saw Nigeria's foreign policy within the period of 1993 to 1998 as: "Transferred Aggression" of sorts. Therefore, it was Abacha's own way of fighting the international community which was his own defensive mechanism. His resort to attack as the best form of defense attracted the attention of the press (see The Guardian, June 9, 1988; 15).

However, Oladapo Fafowora felt that Nigeria could not gain much by cooperating with third-rate technology of the likes of China, Turkey, India who, themselves are dependent on the western designs and patents. To him, Abacha's regime turning to these countries for technical aid and support may not help the technological growth of Nigeria country. These countries are only third rate countries who have nothing technologically to offer to our country, Fafowora concluded.

Lanre Ehonwa felt that Nigeria's foreign policy attitude had only been beneficial, because the international community had not been able to muster the political will necessary to boycott Nigeria's oil. Hence, "all that Nigeria was trying to do during Abacha's regime was build enemies and this only kept Nigeria in the backwater of international economic and political relations rather than in the fore front as it desired". To worsen matters, he said "unsubstantiated allegations are regularly made by the government against foreign missions and their home governments. To Osutokun (1989), if Nigeria had a proper management of her foreign affairs and the Head of State gets the right information he needed, he too would have to be very much aware of what was going on and would so instruct. On foreign policy thrust during Abacha's Regime, Osuntokun (1989) felt it was aimed at making more enemies than more friends for the nation. Hence, during Abacha's regime, diplomatic relations were strained and leading to diplomatic bridges being broken.

Reviewing the role of the press in Abacha's regime, The Guardian (Sunday, 1998), in an essay written by Ojugbana Charles, stated: *"The arrival of General Sani Abacha as the Head of State of Nigeria was largely engineered by the press. The vivid and detailed description and analysis of the confusion that attended the immediate post June 12 annulment period and venomous qualifications defining the ineptitude of the Interim National Government of Chief Ernest Shonekan all set the stage for the emergence of a strong and hardline leader to takeover the reins of government in those trying times. "General Abacha was unequally the most qualified man to takeover at that time" (Ojugbana, 1998), in the Sunday Guardian, 1980, p. 10).*

### **Abacha's regime and international community**

According to Akinterinwa (1998: p. 10): *"It is indeed arguable to suggest that Nigeri's is Foreign policy is not programmed under the Abacha is administration. To a great extent, foreign policy under Gen. Sani Abacha was more reactionary than programmed".* Akinterinwa was of the opinion that the foundation of Abacha's government was only aimed at diverting the attention of Nigerians from the home problems through the peace keeping operations and restoration of democracy in other countries. Writing on Abaha's foreign policies in an article entitled 'How International Community Tackled Abacha', The Guardian (Friday June 12, 1988: p.7) wrote:

One assumption of office, on November 17, 1993, the international community had expected the Gen. Sani Abacha's led administration which replaced the Chief Ernest Shonekan led Interim National Government (ING) to de-annual the June 12 election and announce the winner. But the administration remained recalcitrant, incurring a spate of sanctions from the United States and 12 members of European Union.

With the execution of the nine Ogoni activists Nigeria was made virtually a pariah state. The hanging of the Activists was greeted with international condemnation and outrage. Nigeria was suspended from Commonwealth of Nations for violating the principles of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of , 1991. Following the development, a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) was mandated to liaise with Nigeria on the issue of human rights and democracy. Canada and Britain were prominent among countries whose sanctions on Nigeria were decisive. Nevertheless, in 1995, South African President, Nelson Mandela urged the United States and the EU to impose an embargo on Nigeria. Hence International sporting activities were not spared as the 1995 edition of the International Football Federation (FIFA) Under-20 Tournament tagged Nigeria 95 was canceled. Also, South Africa canceled an invitation extended to Nigeria to attend the 20<sup>th</sup> (1996)edition of the Cup of Nations in South Africa and subsequently Nigeria was banned for four years from participating in the game.

Following the annulment of June 12, 1993, over 150 firms left Nigeria (see The Guardian, June 12, 1988). *"The truism that economic activities can only thrive under a conducive political environment holds sway for the Nigerian situation given the down turn in the nation's economy since the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election by the military administration of General Babangida on June 23 that year".* (Gurdian, June 12, 1988). The paper went on to state that the purchasing power of the people had gone down due to the crisis. Also, a lot of foreign investments in oil and textile sectors were being diverted from Nigeria. Three major foreign policy issues will be analyzed using content analyses of newspaper and magazine reports to situate the role of the press in Abacha's foreign policy issues. Hence, the suspension of Nigeria from commonwealth, the restoration of democracy in Sierra Leone and the regime's handling of the Bakassi dispute

between Nigeria and Cameroun were some of the Nigeria's foreign policy within the period under review.

### **Empirical studies on the press and foreign policy**

Studies in the role of the press in foreign policy suggest that articles concerning respondents, own country should have stronger effect than articles that do not (Lent, 1997). However, the main issue in understanding the effects of the press in foreign policy is to distinguish between effects that are truly media - driven and effects that are simply a results of real world indicators. If the media is only mirroring real - world circumstances, what we call "media effect" may be appropriately seen as real world effect. Therefore, "media effects" on foreign policy may lie somewhere in between the gap existing in the media content and reality (Sorola, 2003).

Some studies in the United States and beyond have indicated that public opinion often has a measurable impact on US foreign policy (See Hartley and Russett 1992; Hill 1998; Sobel 2001; Wlezien, 1996). However, some other studies have shown that such public opinion can be volatile and incoherent (Almond, 1950; Converse, 1964, Miller, 1967). Studies in the 1970's support the conclusion that public opinion on foreign affairs is often stable, sensibly organised and rational (Caspary, 1970; Mueller, 1973; Page and Shapiro, 1992. In recent times, some scholars such as Soroka (2003) have shown that the press can use agenda - setting to create salience on foreign affairs for the public. Using a combination of US and UK commercial polling data, and American national election study, Soroka's study indicated the importance of Mass media and issue salience in the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. However Little research seems to existing in the area of relationships existing between the policy makers and the press in Nigeria. Hence, the present study represents an effort at exploring these relationships. Through, content analysis. Nworgu (1995) in a study on the press and the making of Ibrahim Babangida's foreign policy concluded that, despite the political and economic problems that affected the press and indeed, the country within the period of (1985 to 1995) the press still paid attention to the country's foreign policy issues. Hence, the press performed well on foreign policy issues during Babangida's regime.

However, there have been different classifications and attributes of different eras in Nigeria's foreign policy from the period of independence till date (Fawole 2003; Bukarambe 2010; and (Asobie, 2010). To Asobie (2010), Nigeria's diplomatic history may be divided into Age of Innocence (1960-1974), Era of Awakening (1975-1984), the Epoch of Realism (1985-1992), the Dark Age (1993-1998), and the Renaissance (1999-2010). Again, Akinboye (2005) did classify Nigeria's foreign policy into periods of strategic partnership. Therefore, the nation's foreign policy in the midst of international political system revolves around regional integration (Sesay and Akonai, 2010); Regional security issues in Africa continent (Imobighe, 2010); managing security at sub-regional level (Alli, 2010; Golwa, 2010); international integration as represented by participation in UN Peace Mission (Musa, 2010; Oche, 2010) and extra regional security challenges (Saliu, 2010a; Saliu, 2010a, b).

Also, some studies have shown that Nigeria should engage in international politics in order to benefit from economic systems of the world in areas of trade and commerce at regional and international levels (Akinterinwa, 2010; Ogunsanwo, 2010; Olufemi, 2010). Invariably, the economic benefits of Nigeria's foreign policy thrust have been highlighted by several writers such as Adaji (2009), Akinyosoye (2009), Egom (2009), Eze (2009), and Nwoke (2009). To this effect, it has been argued that Nigeria should strive to benefit economically from most of her foreign policy initiatives in Africa and the rest of the world (Bukarambe, 2010; Ogwu, 2005; and Olaniyan, 2005).

Not only has there been the need to maximize the economic benefits accruing from Nigeria's foreign policy initiatives, also, there has been calls for a better management of

our external debt (Alli, 2006; Dokubo, 2006; Oche, 2006). Therefore, the importance of Nigeria and indeed African states on the International scene has continued to grow steadily. "African countries which account for over a quarter of the UN votes, actively participate in discussing the cardinal questions of maintaining peace, promoting international and regional security and addressing topical global problems" (Tikhomirov, 2010: 83). In his analysis of Nigeria's foreign policy since independence, Adeniyi (2005) tried to divide the periods into "Nigeria at independence" or the Belewa administration (1960-1966); The civil war or oil boom years (1977-1983) and "the Obasanjo civilian administration" (1999-2007). The above divisions do not represent any policy thrust for description of the nation as contained in the divisions done by other scholars. The essence of using foreign thrust to classify the epochs in Nigeria's relationship with other countries is not only to put each era or administration in proper perspective but to give a description to its policy initiatives and also to judge each era by the nature, dynamism and vibrancy of its policies.

In some studies, the press is seen as the channel of communication involved in the collection and dissemination of information. The press included, newspapers, magazines, radio, television and wire services. They are also defined as members or vehicles of the media. Some media scholars have continued to explore the role of the press in national interest (Van Belle, 2010). At the heart of these studies is the understanding that the press plays and should play a positive role in nation building through unbiased and effective reportage of both local and foreign news items (Norris and Odugbemi, 2010). To this effect, the press has been acknowledged as important sources of information for a wide range of political public affairs issues and social institutions (Dominick, 2000; Biagi, 2003; Voltmer, 2010). However, no serious attempt has been made to access its role in Nigerian's foreign, publicity or implementation. Unfortunately, all these studies failed to acknowledge specifically, the role of either the press or communication plays in foreign policy making. However, Akinterinwa in a study used content analysis to examine the role of the press in Nigeria's foreign policy.

### **Theoretical framework**

This work is anchored on the of "Area Boy or Bus Stop Diplomacy". The term was coined by a section of Nigerian media and some foreign policy experts to describe the rash, rush and hasty nature of Abacha's foreign policy initiatives following the international communication isolation and alienation of his regime (Osuntokun, 1989; Akinterinwa, 1998; This Day, Oct. 1998; and The Guardian, Oct. 1998). As noted by Akinterinwa (1998), General Sani Abacha's reactive foreign policy initiative was characterized by political bricks of confusion and discord. Hence apart from the fact that Abacha's regime was rejected by the international community, the killing of the "Ogoni five" and other human rights violations further made the country a pariah state. The suspension of the country from common wealth and the sanctions imposed on the country pushed the regime into looking for friendship of the countries of the East, including China. For instance, in an editorial entitled: destabilizing Nigeria allegation; ThisDay, (June 8, 1998), the paper, notes: the disparaging the actions of Special adviser to the late Head of State, Alhaji Wada Nas (now Late), who named Ghana, South Africa and United States of America as the collaborators in a plot destabilize Nigeria. The paper condemned the premature announcement of the Allegation and the shoddy handling of the issues. The above incident clearly paints the picture of the nature of the relationship that existed between Nigeria and International community during Abacha's regime and why his foreign policy was variously described as "Area Boy diplomacy" or Bus Stop diplomacy (see Akinterinwa, 1998; The Guardian sept 27, 1998, p. 15).

Some scholars who are in support of the doctrine of Area Boy diplomacy, showed their support for Abacha's approach to foreign policy. Hence, they had argued that despite



the accusations of human rights violations, America still invested in China. Hence, the value of united States to china in 1995 stood at \$17 billion to china within the same period. Therefore, a lot of people saw nothing wrong with Nigerians relations with china. (see Esienwekia, 1996, in Guardian, July 20, 1996). To his effect, the paper is anchored on the way which the newspaper stories reflected the foreign policy disposition of Abacha's regime, within the context of Area Boy or Bus Stop Diplomacy.

## Methodology

The study involved content analysis, historical and case study designs. The instrument for data collection included manifest content analysis of newspaper contents library material related to the subject matter. The sampling technique used for the study was the purposive sampling, involving all the newspaper stories, features, opinion articles on the subject matter within the period under studied.

The population included all newspaper stories published on Abacha's regime within the period of 1993-1998. A total sampling size of 56 news stories, articles personal opinion and features were selected purposively constructed weeks of two days interval. Four national newspapers, namely, The Guardian, This Day, Vanguard [?] and Post Express were used.

## Result and discussion

### **RQ1: what were the thrust of press contributions to Nigeria's foreign policy issues during the period under review?**

The suspension of Nigeria from commonwealth. The problem between Abacha's regime and the Commonwealth of Nations started with the sentencing of the five Ogonis to death and subsequent hanging of the convicts, including a play-wright and novelist, Ken Saro Wiwa. This was against international communities pleas for clemency. Following the incident, Commonwealth Ministerial Action Committee met and approved the suspension of the country from commonwealth. Also, partial sanctions were imposed on the country by both European countries and the United States of America. This development generated a lot of reactions from the press. Some were in support of Abacha's regime while others were against it, consequently, and the country was finally suspended from the common wealth. The remaining of this section will be devoted to the analysis of press reactions to the suspension.

Commenting on the suspension of Nigeria from Commonwealth, Akinterinwa Bola, in This Day (June 22, 1998) wrote: *"The Nigerian leader was appealed to by many of his African counterparts not kill Kenule Saro Wiwa and others. The European leaders as well as other world leaders pleaded with General Abacha who gave the impression that he would commute their sentences. In fact, he not only shocked the world by killing them but also did so when commonwealth summit was in session"*. This irked the organization and she decided to suspend Nigeria's membership. Also, the European Union imposed additional sanctions on Nigeria (see ThisDay, June 22, 1988, p. 10).

The Guardian (Oct. 20, 1998: 15) reported that: *"Nigeria's isolation from the international community got to a humiliating point in 1995 in the wake of the controversial execution in November that year of nine Ogoni minority rights activists including Ken Saro Wiwa by the regime of late military dictator, Gen. Sani Abacha"*. The paper noted that the murder angered the then British Prime Minister, Mr. John Major who called it 'Judicial Murder'. Hence, Nigeria was suspended from commonwealth. This was followed, according to The Guardian, a wide range of sanctions imposed on the country by European Union. A Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) made up of Britain, Canada, Ghana, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Africa and headed by Zimbabwean Foreign

Minister, Dr. Stan Mudenge, was set up. This group was to monitor the extent of adherence to the minimum standard of good governance, rule of law and human rights in the Nigeria.

The Guardian (October 15, 1997, p. 8) reported that during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Edinburgh, Scotland in October 1997, *"It was the group's view that the most blatant violations of the Harare principles; the failure of military government in Nigeria to complete a credible programme for the restoration of democracy and civilian rule is a prime source of Commonwealth concern and provided the context for a range of further violations"*. Against this backdrop, the group recommended the continued suspension of Nigeria from Commonwealth pending the complete transition from military to civilian come October 1, 1998 as promised by the then Head of State, (Late) Gen. Sani Abacha. The Guardian further stated that Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) further decided to seek the help of other countries including the international community to impose a mandatory oil embargo on Nigeria; ban all our links with the country and freeze the account of the military leaders if the Abacha's regime failed to give the nation a credible transition. It should be recalled that Abacha's transition lacked credibility because it was aimed at transforming him from a Military ruler to a civilian president. According to Liyoyed Afworthy, the Canadian Foreign Minister, *"The issue of Nigeria was not about moving towards democracy but the manner in which the democratization process is achieved"*. Nothing had suggested that Nigeria was in the right direction; he concluded (see, The Guardian, October 20, 1998, p. 15).

Writing on the events that led to the suspension of Nigeria from Commonwealth, The Punch (August 27, 1988, p. 22) noted: *"like other members of the international community, South Africa had been concerned about Abacha's gross violation of the human rights of Nigerians as exemplified by the November 1995 execution of minority right crusader, Ken Saro Wiwa and eight of his Ogoni kinsmen"*. This execution, according to the paper, sparked off an international outrage against the Abacha's regime, leading to the imposition of several sanctions against Nigeria including the suspension of Nigeria from commonwealth. Therefore, the suspension of Nigeria from Commonwealth led to the frosty relationship between Nigeria and South Africa. Hence the late Dr. Nelson Mandela continued to view Abacha *"as a disgrace to African leadership"*, The Punch noted. (Also see, Bukara Mbe, 2003).

### **The restoration of democracy in Sierra Leone**

The problem in Sierra Leone started when the people of that country woke up to a military coup (The Guardian, 1997, p. 31). This was followed by the initial announcement of a successful coup by a Corporal in 'Pidgin' English. Hence, the country was thrown into uncertainty until two days later when Major Johnny Koromah, who was serving a jail term for an unsuccessful coup attempt was released and appointed the new Head of State of Sierra Leone. The development came both as a surprise and shock to the international community and the citizens of the country. Major Koromah's appointment was condemned by international community. Following this development, the ECOMOG forces which were already in a peace-keeping mission in Liberia were detailed by the ECOWAS Heads of State, to re-instate the democratically elected government of Tejani Kabbah.

This was followed by both economic and political sanctions imposed on Koromah's regime. The aim was to make him quit peacefully. Also, the ECOWAS government entered into negotiation with the coupists on the possibility of relinquishing power to the elected government. While such negotiations were still going on, the regional peace force was still kept on alert on the possibility of military option against the junta. In a headline, *"Sierra Leone: ECOMOG is Combat Ready"*, The Guardian (July 2, 1997, 48) wrote that: *"ECOMOG Field Commander, Gen. Victor Malu said that the force was combat ready to flush out the coup leaders in Sierra Leone"*. The Field Commander further explained that even though the regional multinational peace keeping force had not been given an order to eject the

rebel, he warned that ECOMOG might simultaneously use dialogue, embargo and force, if the coup leaders remained adamant. Explaining the mission of ECOMOG in Sierra Leone, Gen Malu stated that ECOMOG's duty in Liberia is different from the mandate it received in the Sierra Leonean operations.

Also, commenting on ECOMOG operations in Sierra Leone, The Guardian (July 6, 1997, p. 13) reported thus: "probably because it happened in this part of the world, the international media is yet to adequately report the subsequent defeat of Major Paul Johnny Koromah's junta in that tiny West African country. This effort had gone in history as the first time a regional peace keeping force would go into a country, fight and route out a ruling military junta for the sole purpose of reinstating an ousted civilian president.

The paper praised the ECOMOG leaders for the decision to fight and restore democracy in Sierra Leone. The paper further asked whether ECOMOG will stand as a regional force which will intervene in any country whenever there was attempt by a military junta to usurp power through the barrel of the gun. In an interview conducted by The Guardian newspaper, some of the respondents expressed their feelings that Nigeria's leadership role in Africa is being exercised. For instance, Dr. Charles Ade Alade rationalized the leadership role played by Nigeria in the ECOMOG expedition in Sierra Leone, this way:

I feel that ECOMOG and Nigeria have a big role to play in that country. We at first criticized Nigeria's involvement in that country, since ours itself is a military regime. But come to look at it deeply, there should not be any vacuum in every dispensation. We have a legitimate right to be there and remember Nigeria's foreign policy thrust, is centered on Africa and the West African sub region in particular. Nigeria and indeed ECOMOG should continue to maintain peace and order there and to only restore Kabbah but also help him to consolidate power (Alade, 1997).

Dr. Alade further stated that our involvement is justified by fact that power counts in international relations... To him; Nigeria's intervention in Sierra Leone is justified. *"If it is interpreted as intervention, the Americans did it in Panama when Manuel Noriega was ousted. The British did it in the Maldives Island"*. Comparing America's involvement in Panama with the country's involvement in Sierra Leone, Dr. Alade felt that: While "America's interest was parochial, ours is a wider interest meant to forestall attendant problems like refugee crises of which Nigeria would still bear the brunt". Hamman Yerima writing in The Guardian (July 2, 1997), felt that ECOMOG operations in Sierra Leone has actually sent a warning signal against future military coupes and interventions in the sub-region. To him, it could be that West African sub-region had witnessed dozens of military coups since independence, there is general opposition to military in the entire continent.

Also, The Guardian (April 14, 1998, p. 7) reported in a story entitled "ECOMOG Moves to Dislodge Koromah's Forces", that Koromah fled Freetown after ECOMOG forces captured the city where he is believed to be mobilizing troops for an onslaught against ECOMOG. Consequently, based on the successful operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively, ECOMOG is expected to be involved in restoring peace to Guinea Bissau (The Guardian, July 29, 1988, p. 13).

The Daily Champion (Thursday Feb. 19, 1998, p. 1) in a story entitled 'ECOWAS to Reinstate Kabbah Soon', wrote: *"The defence authorities in Lagos, Tuesday, confirmed yesterday's meeting in Freetown of ECOWAS Committee of Five comprising foreign ministers of Nigeria, Guinea, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone to decide when ousted President Tejan Kabbah will return to Sierra Leone"* The paper went ahead to state that the reinstatement of Alhaji Kabbah had been ECOMOG's core mandate, The line of action ECOMOG troop was

aimed at saving lives and properties and prevent looting in that country, the paper concluded.

The paper refuted the thinking that Nigeria has appointed a Head of State for the country. Therefore, according to the defense spokesman, Col. Godwin Ugbo, Nigeria had not appointed a Head of State for Sierra Leone nor had she set up an interim government in that country. Rather, one of the Sector Commanders of ECOMOG had been asked to ensure that what has been achieved by ECOMOG in the past few weeks would not be destroyed. Also, the Post Express in a front page story reported that Sankoh of Sierra Leonean Revolutionary United Front (RUF) had been released from detention. The released rebel leader pledged to help ECOMOG in persuading other rebel fighters to lay down their arms. The paper reported that *"excited Sierra Leoneans are demanding the rebel leaders' immediate trial. But unarmed ECOMOG officer suggested they should seek national reconciliation first before embarking on recriminations"* (Post Express, July 28, 1998, p. 1-2).

In another story entitled, 'US Accuses Liberia of Fueling Sierra Leonean Crisis', Post Express (July 24, 1998, p. 4) wrote: *"the United States of America have accused Liberia of fueling the crisis in Sierra Leone through the supply of arms and ammunitions to the remaining rebels fighting the eastern part of the country"*. The statement came from the American Defence Attaché to Liberia, Colonel Thomas Dempssay. The paper also quoted the ECOMOG Commander, Major General Timothy Shelpidi as saying that the international community have expressed their satisfaction over the performance of the ECOMOG force in the Sierra Leone problem. The Guardian on Sunday (Sept. 7, 1997, p. 20) in an article entitled 'Taylor-Kabbah: Two Presidents at ECOWAS Summit', reported that President Charles Ghankay Taylor of Liberia and his disposed embattled Sierra Leonean counterpart, Alhaji Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, were two prominent actors at the just concluded ECOWAS Summit in Abuja.

However, there was growing concern by Nigerians that the federal government ought to put a stop to its new-found love for international military expeditions. One of those who held this opinion was Professor Tunde Fatunde, a social critic and writer who noted ; *"It is time to put a stop to our human and material resources now being wasted needlessly in these foreign expeditions. We spent \$3 million on Liberia, we are in Bakassi and we are talking about Sierra Leone again. The time has now come for government to consider non-military options. The spending will weigh down our economy which is already prostrate"*.

Stressing that military expeditions are now archaic and unprogressive, Fatunde maintained that we need these funds to uplift our people. We should remember that waterloo contributed to the collapse of the French economy, and similarly the Russian economy felt the effects of Afghanistan. We are not forgetting the American experience in Vietnam, he argued. It will be recalled that Kabbah set what looks like a tall order for the sub-regional leaders, during the ECOWAS in Abuja. Emphasizing his point, Kabbar stated, *"my people wait your decision and your action for the restoration of the security of their lives and their future. Whether they will continue to live in fear, hunger, trauma and destruction at the hands of a criminal regime will depend on the decision we take here today."* However, The Guardian on Sunday (Sept. 7, 1997, p. 20) in an article entitled "Resolving the Sierra Leone Question." Quoted a reliable source - Dr. Eworanyenu as saying that: the undercurrents and intrigues are bogging down reinstatement of ousted President, Alhaji Tejan Kabbah. The United State and European Union (EU) are in their heart of heart deeply irked by Nigeria's key role in restoring Kabbah's threatened democracy. Their alleged reason was that Nigeria is a bad example of democratization, with her extensively human rights abuses. Also within the ECOWAS nations, there is suspicion and mistrust on the mission. In a story entitled "Investment climate brighten as new page turns in Sierra Leone's politics." The Post Express (Friday July 24, 1998, p. 16)

reported that normalcy has returned to Sierra Leone. On the contrary, The Guardian (Saturday, Feb. 13, 1998, p. 1-2) quoted the spokesman for the military junta of Major Koromah as saying "this is just the beginning in the battle, if Nigeria think they can come here to dominate us, they are missing the point." (See Also The Guardian, Feb. 15, 1998).

Therefore, victory was achieved with minimal loss of lives. With the development, the paper concluded, "Nigeria is calling on all friends of Sierra Leone to assist in the urgent tasks of bringing humanitarian relief to the troubled people." Nigeria wanted the United Nations, especially the Security Council to facilitate the development of a military observer mission to Sierra Leone. In another story entitled "Sierra Leone refugees arrives in Nigeria", The Guardian, (July 2, 1997, p. 15) reported that refugees from the Sierra Leone have started arriving Nigeria. The paper acknowledged the help of Nigerian government and the United Nations' Commission for Refugees in trying to resettle the refugees who escaped from their homes in Sierra Leone to avoid the rebel soldiers' onslaught on innocent and defenseless civilian population.

Yerima Hamman (1997) writing in The Guardian, July 2, 1997, under the title, "Sierra Leone: Foreign Policy Issues" states thus:

We shall look at that combination of both the domestic and external factors that might have influenced the decision of the ECOWAS members countries to say "No" to the coupists in Sierra Leone and to demand for the immediate return of power to Ahmed Tejah Kabbah and his democratically elected government.

Yerima opined that Nigerian government under Abacha may have perceived the threat which the continued and prolonged war or crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone posed to sub-regional unity.

The writer, therefore recognized the leadership of the late Gen. Sani Abacha as the then ECOWAS Chairman. Unfortunately, the peace in Sierra Leone did not last as the coupists regrouped and fought the Kabbah's administration.

#### **Nigeria-Cameroun border dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula:**

Commenting on the above border dispute and Abacha's ability to handle it, Akinterinwa Bola wrote in ThisDay (June 22, 1998, p. 10), thus:

In the area of Nigeria's border dispute with Cameroun, the confrontational policy is praise worthy. Since a long time, Cameroun has always attacked the Nigerian border villages. In 1981, five Naval Patrol officers from Nigeria were killed. Consequently the Shelu Shagari government compelled Cameroun to pay compensation to the families of the deceased.

The above scenario have characterized the Nigeria-Cameroun border until late Gen. Sani Abacha came to power. Abacha resisted any form of aggression and embarrassment of Nigeria by Cameroun. This attitude compelled Cameroun, which initially refused International Court of Justice (ICJ) for a redress to agree to such international mediation.

In a feature story entitled 'Bakassi Still Waiting for a Solution', The Guardian (March 29, 1995, p. 6) wrote that the boundary dispute between the two countries had lasted for some time now. Tracing the origin of the dispute, the paper stated thus; "Cameroonians came to Afabong after the Civil War. Until the end of the war, the Cameroonians occupied the area. But Cameroun Embassy officials insist that the Bakassi Peninsula is Cameroun territory", the paper reported. The Cameroun authorities from time to time, subject Nigerians to the inconvenience of molestation and physical pain, but there is no doubt that a day will come when the Nigerian government will decide to put an

end to the periodic molestations either by force or by quiet diplomacy, the paper concluded.

In a related report, *The Guardian* (March 27, 1990, p. 8), in a piece entitled: 'Bakassi Peninsula Basking in Tension over Unresolved Frontier', In the report, the paper x-rayed the activities of the Cameroonian Gendarmes who kept harassing Nigerian fishermen. The paper noted that sometimes a pattern had emerged, each time there is confrontation, the fishermen, whose fore-bearers have inhabited the area since 1800 will lodge complaints with their kings in Ikang. The news is ferried across to the Nigerian press and diplomatic circles but nothing happened. However, it will record that Cameroun later won the case over the disputed peninsula and Bakassi was formally handed over to the Cameroonian government under Olusegun Obasanjo's presidency (Nworgu, 2019).

**RQ2: What were the dominant foreign policy issues reported by the press during the period under review?**

From the available data gathered through manifest content analysis of newspaper reports the results showed that there are three dominant foreign policy issues that attracted the attention of the press during the period 1993-1998. The issues are: the suspension of Nigeria from Commonwealth of Nations, restoration of democracy in Sierra Leone through ECOMOG and the peaceful settlement of Nigeria-Cameroun border dispute among others (See *The Guardian*, July 6, 1997; *The Punch*, August 27, 1988; and *ThisDay*, June 22, 1998). These foreign issues were both widely acknowledged as weighty and represented the highlights of Abacha's diplomatic efforts and woes (see Ojughana, 1995; Akinterinwa, 2010, Yerima, in *The Guardian*, July 2, 1997).

**RQ3: What were the directionality, and story types content categories on the foreign policy issues covered by the press within the period under review?**

The press during the period under study, the press published some favourable stories such as the story supporting Nigeria's effort at restoring the democratically-elected government of Sierra Leone (Yerima, in *The Guardian*, July 2, 1997; Alade, 1997) and the country's bid to lay claim over Bakassi Peninsula which remained a disputed area between Nigeria and Cameroun till the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling in favour of Cameroun (*The Guardian*, March 12, 1995, p. 6; *The Guardian*, March 27, 1990, p. 8) The press had (see *The Guardian*, May 7, 1997; *The Guardian*, July 2, 1997; *Post Express*, July, 1998) some unfavourable stories were published about some foreign policy initiatives of Abacha's regime. One good example is suspension of Nigeria from Commonwealth due to the killing of 'Ogoni Nine'. The press wrote some stories that did not favour the Nigerian government and gave which full support to the suspension of the country (see *ThisDay*, June 22, 1998; *The Guardian*, October 20, 1998). Therefore, out of the three foreign policy initiatives examined, the press wrote favourable stories on the restoration of democracy in Sierra Leone and Nigeria-Cameroun border dispute. However, the suspension of Nigeria from common wealth did not attract much negative or unfavourable reports dispute the fact that it needed to the reason for not writing in support of the suspension of Nigeria may not be unrelated to. The dictatorial tendencies of Abacha's regime and its pendant for persecuting and imprisoning critics, including press men. (see Tunde Fatunde, in *The Guardian*, Feb, 13, 1998, p. 1-2).

About the story types, the newspapers had more of opinion articles than straight news stories. Also, some of the stories appeared as interpretative piece, and personal opinion articles while less number of stories appeared as editorials, or investigative pieces. On the content categorization, the results from content analysis showed that the reports from the newspapers showed the national benefits of each policy, the citizens' reactions to such policy; the international community's reactions to such policy issue.

These categorizations can be deduced from the reading the foreign policy stories on the selected foreign policy issues.

## Conclusion

As has been noted by Ojugbana in *The Guardian* (Sunday, September 27, 1998), the real confusion which surely stared every Nigerian in the face was the fact that the press more than anybody or institution contributed greatly to the later manifestations of heavy handedness and even the self-succession bid of the late General Sani Abacha. The press was accused of working at cross-purpose with a section supporting the negative policies of the Abacha's regime. This was true especially, with state-owned press.

Ojugbana (1998) was of the opinion that some section of the press as represented by *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *ThisDay*, *Tell Magazine*, *The News Magazine* and *Tempo Magazine* were identified as being constant and consistent with their contributions to Nigeria's foreign policy issues during the period under review. Hence, they stood out in their position or opposition to negative policies without undue change of stance. Therefore, we conclude that the press made a lot of contributions to Nigeria's foreign policy issues during the period under review. This can be seen from the extensive reportage by the press on the identified policies. From all the issues examined, the Nigerian government allowed for contributions from a wide range of persons, including the press. For example, the swift of relations from the West to the East, trade relations and technical aid from China Nigeria attracted both support and condemnation from both the press and Nigerian citizens (see Abugu, 1997; Fafowora, 1997 in *The Guardian*, September 18, 1997; Yerima in *The Guardian*, July 2, 1997).

## Conclusion

From the findings form the study we conclude that press report on the examined foreign policy did not make much impact on the outcome of these since the military regime in power never wanted opposition or criticisms. Therefore, the regime went ahead to Isolate itself from main stream international politics and the press was helpless due to the fear of being gagged or proscribed as was the practice of the Abacha's administration. However, the press assumed a patriotic posture in her support for the regime's approach to Bakassi peninsula dispute between Nigeria and Cameroun. Also the issue of peace keeping in the sub-region got the tack approval of the Nigerian press, even when a cross section of Nigerian citizens were skeptical about the regime interventionist policy in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Therefore, due to series of negative policies or events occasioned by the draconian positives of Abacha's regime, isolationism remained. The foreign policy thrust of the regime.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that have no conflicts of interest.

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