

WHO ARE THE SMUGGLERS?

BY P. A. CURTIS JOSEPH

Col. John Shagaya must have been very pleased with himself when he came out with sweeping accusations of corruption and aiding smugglers against officers of Customs and Excise.

He announced with glee the retirements of the Director of the department and some of his senior officers, and promised that the purge would continue, and even spread to the other two departments - immigration and prisons under him.

There is no doubt that there is corruption in the department as it is everywhere - in the Police, in the Army and all private and public sectors. But I consider it hypocritical to treat the Customs and Excise in isolation. The whole society is rotten and the Military cannot absolve itself from the process that has led the nation to the present decadence.

Let me give a few examples. Before listing them I should let it be known that I worked under a leading British Company for fourteen years until 1951 and I went into private business from 1952 to 1982, and I was very connected with the Ports.

In the oil boom years, to be precise, during the cement armada, a containers storage was created near Malu Road, Apapa, named LILYPOND. There was a time Customs Officers impounded some containers with contrabands. The owners later brought a



letter purported to have been from Doddan Barracks and signed by a high official asking that the goods be released to the owners.

The senior Customs Officer refused. I don't remember his name. He was a Calabar man. The next thing was that a detachment of Riot Police was sent to force the release. The courageous Customs Officer asked his men to pull their guns and be ready to lay down their lives. Then he talked to the Police Officer who led the Riot Police in words that could be put in this way: "You are a uniformed officer like us under the same government; if you are sent to force us to carry out unlawful orders, we are ready to face you and kill ourselves to help smugglers".

The Police Officer was touched and he took his men away peacefully. One or two days later the Customs Officer with his immediate lieutenants were transferred and replaced with "Yesmen". The contrabands were released.

In 1976, a politician, very much connected with the Military arrived at the Lagos Airport with thirty six heavy boxes as personal effects. The question among the Customs Officers was whether to subject the boxes to the usual examination. After arguments for and against, the senior officer who was afraid of victimisation cleared the goods without examination. The politician was delighted.



The incident of the fifty three suite cases from Saudi Arabia at the time there was currency change is another instance. What frustration is more than the foregoing and how do you expect them to perform with the different standards?

At the Sea Ports, and Land Borders, especially the airports, one need to see how uniformed men interfere to make Customs Officers helpless when people - both men and women - arrived and their luggage pass through without examination with Customs Officers helpless.

Politicians brought their influence to bear on everything and everybody, in protecting their thugs and corrupt members. Then corruption and smuggling took institutionlised shape.

The coming of the Military has not improved the situation. Corruption, Smuggling and lawlessness have progressively increased so much that they took on the gab of elitism. People warmed themselves into the good books of those in power to get contracts with "Conditionalities", to smuggle and being protected and to engage in street fighting or shooting and get away with it. We have evolved a life style of extravagance which legitimate earnings cannot sustain. We started worshipping money and people who amass it without caring how it was procured. Drugs trafficking also took its pride of place. Only Armed Robbery has been frowned upon. But pen robbery has flourished in many diverse forms.



Retrenchments and retirements for any reason or reasons have not helped either. Instead they have created a sense of insecurity which encourages people to grab at the least chance before they are sent packing.

Where there is insecurity frustration creeps in, followed by temptation and contamination.

Many people have made money through smuggling and they have become so powerful that any Customs Officer who wants to retain his job cannot apprehend. What of those Customs Officers who had been killed by both uniformed and ununiformed people? Let us put on our thinking caps and reason whether the Governments on Federal and State Levels have not sometimes fallen victims of big time smugglers when going cap in hand to look for "Philantropists" to donate generously to Government projects.

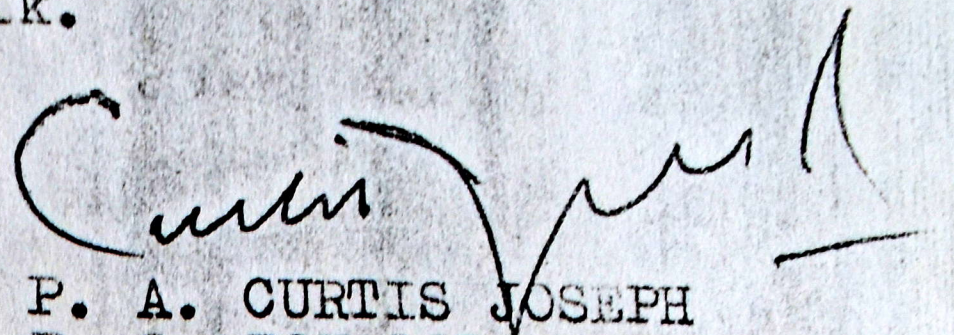
In about four decades of my connection with the Ports, I have looked very much around and have not been able to trace one retired Customs Officer who has become a millionaire, but some of them have been used to create millionaires.

So we must look around and face our problems realistically. The new people to replace the retired Customs Officers can't be saints if there is no guarantee of job and life security.



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We know them but we can't talk.



P. A. CURTIS JOSEPH  
P. O. BOX 2078  
SHOMOLU  
PALM GROVE  
LAGOS

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