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Lawlessness in Nigeria

Motorists have queued up at one of the entrances to a fuel station since 8am inching forward over the hours. By 10am the petrol station attendants begin a thriving trade with those willing to pay them 50 - 100 naira extra. The second entrance is opened for these people to bypass the existing queue by reversing their cars up to the single fuel dispensing unit. An hour later, an angry motorist on the queue confronts them and is joined by a few others. The attendants are indignant at this challenge and threaten to stop selling any fuel at all. A physical fight soon ensues and the station is closed.

The scenario above occurs in a hundred different locations all over the country in this season of constant fuel scarcity. But the scarcity is not the issue nor an excuse for the blatant disregard of normal rules of order and decency by the petrol station owners and attendants.

This is just one example of the arbitrary exercise of power by individuals and groups in our society which has reached alarming heights. Small wonder in a system of governance that gives no room for participation and protest in the process of decision making and implementation, and blocks the channels of communication from the people to the leadership.

In this issue of our newsbulletin, we focus on some of the most visible and frequent examples of daily human rights violations in our society today, by people in whom authority is vested.

These interviews demonstrate that the concept of the police and the military as a protective force is a myth in Nigeria. From colonial times they were trained and armed to wage war against the people, and the predominant perception of their role is evident in the interview with the soldier. Fundamental institutional reforms are needed to change this pattern. The expressions of helplessness by the bus driver and union leader demonstrate the profound sense of disempowerment among people. In this prolonged war over the decades; poor training - formal and informal, ignorance and poverty have decimated people's capacity to organise effective change. Preying on weaker persons and the system that thwarts their struggle for change have become the main coping mechanisms. Can you combat thievery by becoming a thief?



These predominant strategies have a profound impact on the psyche of the people and serious implications for development.

Taking Responsibility for Social Change.

Leadership does indeed have a critical role to play in directing and supervising the process of change. However, too often in our discourse on human rights and justice, we ignore the different levels of leadership in society and the role of the "followership" in determining the character of the leadership. We can hear our own voices in the excuses made for lawlessness (such as low salaries) by all those interviewed. There is an urgent need to recover our sense of indignation at blatant dishonesty and develop appropriate strategies for confronting injustice wherever we find it, nipping it in the bud before it overwhelms us.

The struggle starts now - at home, in our neighborhoods, at work, in churches and mosques; and the buck stops right here with each of us! ■

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Insight & Impact

INSIGHT AND IMPACT is an occasional news bulletin of the Empowerment and Action Research Centre published at least twice a year. It seeks to raise awareness on topical issues in health and social justice providing information and analysis to promote better understanding. It is a discussion forum and we invite our associates, friends and all readers to contribute articles and comments that will enrich the bulletin.

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