

## **A RIDE ON THE DEPORTATION PLANE**

*One person's account of the fated deportation flight to Nigeria*

*and the questions which remain to be answered.*

Some came in their pyjamas, a woman was handcuffed, a handful of men in silence, confused children who never stopped asking their mothers endless questions and a boy with his 25 x 12 size cardboard Santa Claus picture in hand. Tears dropped from my eyes. He held onto that as his most prized possession. When I asked his mum why he was guarding the picture, she said that since he was told we were going to Africa he cried, said that he wanted to take his picture to Africa.

He was born and raised for 5 years in Ireland in a direct provision centre and yet the Irish immigration people in their infinite wisdom picked him up from school that afternoon alongside his two brothers to be deported on the night flight.

Some children were woken up from sleep as early as 4 o'clock that morning, not allowed to have a shower nor brush their teeth. These children were not given any explanation other than that they were going to Africa. For most of them it was their first ride in an airplane. Sure enough, they are going to make that trip because the Minister for Justice, Dermot Ahern, believes they deserve this because they happen to be called Nigerians.

Before departure, bags were packed for the early arrivals, crisps and sandwiches were given and swarms of fierce looking, gigantic immigration officers with their embossed 'Garda' signs were busy doing their jobs. The late arrivals had no packs of snacks because they said that the place they got the meals from was closed. These hungry children had to make do with water.

Documents prepared, fingerprints of adults and children taken for whatever reasons - it was part of the duty of the Garda National Immigration Bureau. Documents complete, there were roll calls of families or single people, unsmiling and stern looking officers attached to them, presumably depending upon the Minister's discretion as usual. A few I learnt were brought from the prisons, a man with a metal clasp on his leg on crutches caused quite a stir. Then in separate Garda vans we went in a convoy to the tarmac - the plane was ready to go.

An Alsatian dog was already on the stairway to sniff at us, while a guard of 'dishonour' was mounted by another group of officers up through to the plane. It was a Thomas Cook airplane. A cramped plane with no space to stretch, Bus Eireann is many times more spacious.

We were ushered in to learn that we were just another group of Nigerian deportees, the plane already packed full with others who had been picked up from different countries. The journey to Greece began, to collect more Nigerian deportees before our final journey to Lagos, Nigeria. Arriving in Greece, we were relieved that at least half of the journey was complete. But then the drama started unfolding, the plane had landed but the waiting game began. For more than two hours we were seated inside the plane and nobody offered any explanation to us. Our Garda National Immigration Bureau and hoards of officers paced up and down, discussing in hushed tones. Countless times the 'senior officers' of each country's immigration went down to a packed bus on the tarmac to have meetings. About what? Children were screaming and uncomfortable but they were shouted down. A child had to wet himself because no deportee, child or adult, was allowed to go to the toilet unless the plane was in the air, a rule which didn't apply to the officers. Two teenage boys had to 'pee' inside water bottles while staring female and male 'distinguished' officers were giggling. I wondered if this was part of the deportation rules.

Still waiting, a satisfied officer was pacing up and down, brandishing his handcuffs. I remember him. I had met him by the toilet door the last time we were in the air. He had stationed himself by the toilet door and he was clicking the handcuffs in front of me to show the superiority of the metal in his hands in case I had any ulterior motive –like trying to jump down from the plane or flush myself down the toilet.

Finally, on 'humanitarian grounds' rather than the technical hitch, we were hounded down to the unused airport lounge in Athens. Remember that after all protocols observed it was past midnight Greek time when we arrived. There we were sitting around until a breakfast of crisps was offered to children at half past 12 and bread and water thereafter, waiting for our return plane at 2 p.m. when we were ordered back to Ireland. Meanwhile deportees from other countries, adults not children, were offered breakfast even before our children were given crisps. Then I saw a woman (a deportee from Ireland) giving an immigration officer money to help buy things for her children but the female officer needed permission from the officer in charge and she came back, returned the money to the mother. No food for the children, at the officer's discretion on behalf of the Minister.

Back in Ireland, yes we have arrived, yes we are 'welcomed' but to what? Is it a few weeks of waiting for the grand-finale of the deportation? Maybe this time in leg-cuffs?

I want to ask the Minister of Justice Dermot Ahern these questions and he can use his ministerial discretion to answer them:

What are the sins of Nigerians?

Is Nigeria the safest country in Africa?

Why is it only Nigerians who have been deported on a monthly basis for three years running?

Are Nigerian cases judged on the basis of the country or on individual merits?

Why do solicitors in Ireland keep telling us that Nigerian cases are not given a fair hearing?

Why are Nigerian asylum cases treated differently from all other nationals?

Why do other nationals have a chance of their cases ending on a positive note but Nigerians always end in deportation?

Why are some Nigerians made to sign at the G.N.I.B. when they are yet to get a deportation order?

Is there any deal between the Nigerian Ambassador to Ireland and the Department of Justice?

I challenge the Minister for Justice and Law Reforms, Dermot Ahern, to bring to the public arena, the statistics of Nigerians that he has given residency to in Ireland since his assumption of office.

I stand to be corrected if there is no ulterior motive and Nigerians have not been singled out for racism.

Thank you my Minister,

Your next victim