

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



Official Highway Extortion

RECENTLY I, unaccompanied, was driven in a private company vehicle (but with no name or logo on it) to Onitsha on a weekday.

Normally, I do that trip on a weekend or holiday and indeed I did return on Sunday. Thus, I was exposed to the regular weekday, during office hour's harassment by local government employees or agents on the highways and urban streets in Edo and Anambra states.

Between Okada and Benin, we were accosted three times by groups of men armed with standard spikes embedded in wood slabs used for stopping vehicles from parking, to ward off diversion and of road works. As the highway was free and as we had no idea what these men were up to, the driver was able to maneuver the car past them. However, inside Benin City with the usual Friday afternoon traffic, we had no such option when about ten men jumped out in front of the car and placed the spiked barriers in front of us. All of them remained attached in my car while ten other cars passed by us unmolested for the next two hours.

They introduced themselves as officials of Ikpoba-Okha local government. I demanded identification and saw their ID cards. Their mission? To collect tariffs from vehicles passing through their local government areas regardless of whether that vehicle's owner/ user is based in Benin, Lagos or Sokoto.

When I demanded that they take us to the nearest police station, they said that the police are fully aware of their activities, and we could go to the station but if my driver would not drive, one of them would. I refused to hand over the keys and suggested instead that one of them enter the vehicle. I was informed that they were not allowed to leave their post until 4:30 pm at which time they would accompany me to their headquarters where the vehicle would be impounded. I refused to negotiate with them, threatened to abandon the car and the driver and transfer to a taxi but I knew I couldn't abandon the driver to an uncertain fate, and I had too much luggage in the car to transfer. As time passed and I was faced with a hazardous nighttime journey, I finally agreed to look at the papers the local government officials were holding.

Are readers aware that there is a list of 123 approved tariffs for vehicles by local government councils? It includes the following for which I plead with enlightened readers to provide me with eluci-

ation:

- 6 Capitation
- 10 Survival
- 11 Hawarding
- 16 Willers
- 35 Audeteral Sales
- 39 KANKAS
- 40 CUAN Stip
- 89 Salcostic

Are these actions authorized by the local government councils and if so are they provided for in the local government legislation?

- 90 Desolution
- 93 Sanctuary
- 116 Jomper
- 120 Motional Registration

The Joint Revenue Association also issues a sticker "For Sanity on our roads". Well titled, for sanity is much needed on Nigeria roads but this method of collection on the payment for the sticker is inherently insane and calculated to induce temporary loss of sanity among victimized vehicle owners/passengers.

What is the Joint Revenue Association (Incorporated) of National Coverage? The office of the Secretary-General is 13 Commercial Road, Apapa, Lagos. The Edo State President Liaison Office is in Ughelli. The JRA issued a document printed (by Nigerian Security and Minting Company, Lagos) "vehicle clearance certificate given to vehicles which have paid to local government councils an unspecified amount of money for local government sticker(s).

The total cost came to eleven thousand naira (N11,000) which was far more than what I had with me, and I still had to buy petrol. The usual bargaining ensued, and I ended up paying three thousand naira (N3,000).

This purchased the following:

Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Clearance Certificate, The Joint Revenue Association Vehicle Clearance Certificate, The Ikpoba

-Okha Local Government Vehicle Outdoor Mobile Display Sticker, The Ikpoba-Okha Mobile Sanitation Fee Sticker and Ikpoba-Okha Vehicle Classification Sticker.

We proceeded to Onitsha, crossed the Niger bridge. I was enjoying the view of the river when suddenly, as we descended, another group of men jumped out and surrounded the car. I showed them our stickers and certificates, but no, the car did not have the Anambra State Board of Internal Revenue Road Tax and the Onitsha Local Government commercial and industrial development emblem for company cars. The cost? Five thousand naira (N5, 000) or the car will be impounded etc. I categorically refused to pay and prepared to offload into a taxi to go to my residence in Onitsha. I was not concerned about leaving the driver in Onitsha because I planned to send people back to the bridgehead from my house. At that point, a relative of my husband, who was driving past came to my assistance. However, he still ended up paying five thousand naira (N5, 000) for those tariffs/taxes before we could leave.

So, altogether I paid eight thousand to travel from Lagos to Onitsha within the same country. I paid taxes/tariffs of which I knew nothing beforehand to local governments in which I am not resident. The payment was enacted by force and harassment by persons whose identities were highly suspicious and non-verifiable. How much, if any, of my payment went to the local government treasuries? Are these actions authorized by the local government councils and if so, are they provided for by the local government legislation? Under which ministry, federal or state, is the Joint Revenue Association?

Has Nigeria regressed to the ancient practice of payment of tolls from one community to another, albeit then in goods? The price of fuel at petrol stations (let alone black-market sites) varies from state to state already. Does all this mean that part of Nigeria has begun to practice fiscal confederalism?

At this rate, no vehicle windscreen will be wide enough to display all the required certificates, stickers, and emblems without which you cannot travel safely within Nigeria.