
Interview: Col. Muhammad Abdullahi Wase



'We have progress to report here in the state of Kano'

Colonel Wase is the military administrator of Kano state. The following are excerpts from two interviews conducted with him by Lawrence Freeman and Uwe Friesecke. The first one was during a visit to Nigeria on July 5, the second was in October.

EIR: You are the administrator and governor of the state of Kano. Could you tell us something about this state, what your functions are, and what the features of the state are?

Wase: Kano is one of the most industrial and commercial centers in the North. It is one of the most populous states in Nigeria. Apart from the commercial and industrial status which Kano enjoys, not only in the northern part of the country, we also are the largest agricultural state in the country, with our agricultural activities taking place all year round. Kano is blessed with dams that favor irrigation. As a matter of fact, we have the largest irrigation capability in West Africa. Kano City is an ancient city. We are a gateway to the North. Kano state is placed strategically, both economically and politically. We have a highly politically motivated people, highly enlightened politically. So Kano, so to speak, is a mini-Nigeria. You have people from various parts of the world, not only from various parts of the country, living together without any problem.

Regarding my responsibility as the administrator of Kano state, I am chief executive of the state. I am responsible for the development of the state economically, politically, and socially. I'm also in charge of keeping law and order, peace and security throughout the state.

EIR: In the 1980s, during the period of the International Monetary Fund's [IMF] structural adjustment programs all over the world and especially in Africa, there was a dramatic deterioration of the terms of trade; a dramatic fall in prices for agricultural raw materials; and at the same time, an increase of the costs of inputs of machinery, fertilizer, etc., through the devaluation of the currency.

Could you give us a sense of how this affected the situation in your state? How did this pressure affect the ability to develop agriculture, to develop infrastructure, and keep

productivity of agriculture growing?

Wase: Certainly all these factors affected the development of the state, not only in the area of agriculture, but also in foreign exchange. What we are trying to do now, is to try and look inward and find out what we can generate to sustain our agricultural growth. The cost of a tractor is so high. A tractor used to cost about 200,000 naira, about 8-10 years ago, and now you need about 1 million naira to buy a tractor. This has an adverse effect on agriculture. . . .

EIR: We have seen that under the World Bank-IMF policies, there was tremendous pressure put on the Nigerian economy—interest rates went up, deregulation was imposed, the exchange rate was out of control. The current government has now put certain measures in place to try to correct that. How do you see those measures by the current government affecting the development of industry and agriculture in Kano state?

Wase: What we used to obtain was land and input of raw materials, and borrowing from the commercial banks, which was at very high interest rates, very costly. The present policy is to encourage the use of local raw materials to produce goods and services for the people. The emphasis is on manufacturing rather than on consumption, because over the years, we have been a nation of consumers, without producing anything. What we are doing in Kano is to ensure that industries that have gone out of production are reactivated. As a matter of fact, we have drawn up an industry policy for the state, which was nonexistent, because this is the only way we will be able to address the problem of industry. What we are trying to do now, is to try to start from the basics, especially industries in the various local government areas, and then encourage people also to pool resources instead of having one-man, individual companies.

Some of the raw materials have to be imported, which means that the industries have to compete for foreign exchange at the banks. So rather than allowing individual manufacturers to go and try and obtain a certain amount of foreign exchange that will not be enough for them, we want them to come together.

That is one of the policies that we are pursuing. . . .

EIR: What kind of loans is Kano state receiving right now? Are you getting World Bank loans?

Wase: Yes, we have a World Bank loan for the rehabilitation of the water scheme, and another for rural areas. From what I've seen so far, some of the loans are not performing to their expected capacity. So we sit down and review the various loans, to make sure that they conform to our requirements, to our ability to pay, and our ability to benefit from the loan.

EIR: Do you think that the conditions they are attaching to these loans are fair and suitable to your conditions, or do you have suggestions of what should be handled in a better way?

Wase: Naturally, some of the conditions are adverse.

EIR: Can you give some examples?

Wase: There is so much delay in the processing, it takes a lot of time. And once you allow the time to elapse, with the skyrocketing rate of inflation, not only in Nigeria, but all over the world, if you don't buy something quickly, by the time you buy it, the amount has doubled. These are some of the conditions. We are trying to make sure that they remove the institutional rules, in order to avoid any delay in the execution of the projects. We are reviewing all the projects.

This interview was conducted in October:

EIR: Given your responsibility for the state of Kano, could you tell us some of the measures you have been taking, some of the areas where you think progress has been made, in terms of education, health, agriculture, infrastructure?

Wase: When we came into office, a lot of problems had developed in the states, and I'm happy to report that major progress has been made toward resolving some of these problems.

Let me take an example of the civil service. We found a very disorganized civil service, and low morale. We have been able to reorganize the civil service, because it's the focal point in any development. We have been able to give a sense of belonging, a sense of responsibility. We have done this through major reorganization, by making sure that we put the proper people in the right place.

We had to do something quickly, in order to improve the quality of life of the people. You know what the indicators are of the quality of life—health, education, food, shelter, and so forth.

In the area of water supply, we've made a lot of improvements toward rehabilitation of both urban and rural water supply systems in the state, because we believe that water is very important, not only for ordinary drinking, but it also is important for preventive health care.

EIR: Could you be more specific about exactly what you've done, what you've succeeded in rehabilitating?

Wase: We'll give you a write-up.

In the area of education, we have done a lot to revive our ailing educational system, which has been battered in the last two years. This we have done in terms of supply of teaching equipment, rehabilitation of dilapidated villages, and schools and primary schools.

In the area of agriculture, which is the most important occupation (about 80% of our people are in agriculture), Kano happens to have one of the most developed agricultural programs in West Africa. So, in that area, we have also made significant achievements toward distribution of farm implements, tools, and so forth.

Our fertilizer distribution is one of the best in the country. And we have been able to reach the local farmers to give them this fertilizer and other farm implements well ahead of time and at a controlled price. I can give you the breakdown of the fertilizer distribution and of farm implements.

Because we are expecting bumper harvests this year, we are making arrangements to ensure that the farm products are purchased by the government directly from the farmers, to prevent any exploitation by the middlemen.

In the area of health, it is our policy to upgrade health care delivery in the local government areas, by upgrading some of the general hospitals. This we have done in quite a number of local governments.

In the area of infrastructure, we are doing everything possible to rehabilitate both roads and railroads. Our effort has been impeded by the torrential rain which we experienced this year. So this effort has been slowed down, but now that the rains are over, we're going to go out, very soon, to ensure the rehabilitation of the roads and railroads, because this is the only effort that will be able to help the farmers to bring their farm products to market. So we are opening the roads, rural roads, to the markets, to facilitate movement.

EIR: How are you able to finance all this?

Wase: We benefit from World Bank loans, but principally, we've been able to do that through judicious use of whatever funds we have.

EIR: What is the combination of the money you get allocated from the federal government and the money you can raise in your state?

Wase: Every state depends on the allocation from the federal government. For our part, we tried to revamp our internal revenue collection system, that is, through local means, on which we've been able to make a little progress, by tightening up collections. We have more than tripled the amount we have been able to realize internally.

EIR: And the federal government part? Has that stayed what it was before, or has that increased?

Wase: The formula for the distribution of revenue allocation remains the same. But it is up to the individual states to be sure that the revenue is collected.

EIR: I would like to go back to the question of agriculture. You would say that Kano is one of the more developed agricultural states in Nigeria. Could you tell us how the farms are organized? Are they primarily subsistence farms, or are they more commercial farms? Is there irrigation? Is there more mechanization?

Wase: There are both subsistence and commercial farm entities here in the state. There are large-scale farmers and there are also subsistence farmers, local peasant farmers. When I say that we have the most developed agricultural system here in this state, it is because of the various dams constructed over the years that allowed farmers to farm all year round. I think Kano state is leading in the area of wheat production and other farm products like tomatoes. In a place not very far from here, they load almost an average of about 100 trucks a day, during the tomato season. So they are looking into the possibility of establishing a small canning industry.

EIR: Do you have any idea of what percentage of the farms are irrigated?

Wase: Quite a large proportion of the land which is under cultivation is irrigated in the state.

EIR: Would you say that Kano has more irrigation than most states in Nigeria?

Wase: No doubt about it. It's the most irrigated.

EIR: Could you say how large these commercial farms are? How much mechanization is involved, in terms of combines being used, advanced machinery?

Wase: There are some highly mechanized farms owned by some farmers, but we are also trying to develop, because of the present economic situation, the semi-indigenous farming technology. Ox-drawn implements—there's a program which we're trying to initiate. The majority of our local farmers are peasant farmers. Because of the high maintenance cost of tractors, and also the high cost of tractors themselves, we are trying to look inwards, getting loans for the farmers, guaranteeing the loans, so that they can buy the animals, and then the ox-drawn implements. That way, the farmers would have control over what they already have, and we believe that that would increase the yield of our various farms, and also increase the income of the farmers.

EIR: I can understand the cost of tractors and maintaining them, but it has been the case historically, that with increased mechanization, you can increase the yield significantly beyond what you can with animal-drawn implements.

Wase: What is happening now, is that the amount needed to repair our little tractors, which were damaged and need

repairs, is so astronomical that we will not be able to repair them. Also, there is a problem of sharing the tractors. The tractors have to have fuel, and you have to move one tractor from one farm to the other. So if care is not taken, by the time the last person gets the tractor, the farming season is over. So there's a need to diversify and make sure that everybody gets the benefit of either the tractors or the ox-drawn implement.

Most importantly, not all the farmers can afford to have the tractors, so they should be able to get something within their reach.

EIR: Or we should find a way to cheapen the cost of tractors. You mentioned that 80% of the people are employed in agriculture. What are the other areas of employment in the state? How big is the urban center in the state of Kano?

Wase: One of the areas of employment is industry. Kano happens to be one of the most industrialized states here, but the industries suffered some reverses over the last two to three years. To prop the industries up, first of all, we initiated what we call an interest rate policy.

This policy is aimed at addressing the problems that the industries are facing, and also to look at certain incentives that can be given to the would-be native [industries]. Such incentives include free land for anybody who wishes to go into business and establish an industry. Also, there's a tax exemption or a tax moratorium for a certain number of years.

We set up a committee which involved the manufacturers, industrialists, and bankers, and with this policy, and the willing participation of the people in the state, most of the industries are now being revived.

EIR: Could you name some of the industries?

Wase: We have textiles. We have canneries. We have plastics industries, agro-based industries, and many other industries, small, medium, and large industries.

EIR: You say that you were supplying fertilizers to farmers. Are fertilizers being developed in Nigeria, or are you importing them?

Wase: The bulk of our fertilizers come through importation. But we now have a company. We also manufacture our own fertilizer here in Kano.

EIR: Was the supply of fertilizer affected by the rapid devaluation of the naira vis-à-vis the dollar?

Wase: No, I don't think so. Because in terms of transporting, bringing the fertilizer into the state, it doesn't hurt. Because what normally happens, is that we get our allocation from the federal government, and we transport it to the states and down to the farmers.

What happened over the years, was a problem of distribution. To overcome the problem of distribution of fertilizer, down to the farmer: This is the major problem.