

By Olayinka Oyegbile

It was a Monday and approaching mid-morning. Wale Fatade, a journalist, had just disembarked from the bus he boarded over an hour ago in Isolo, a suburb of Lagos. Ordinarily the journey should take no more than 30 minutes. However, the bad roads and perpetual traffic logjam of Lagos ensured the journey took more time than it should have.

Running late for his appointment, Fatade slung his backpack across his shoulder and crossed the road to catch a ride on one of the ubiquitous okada (motorbikes) that make it easier to beat the Lagos traffic snarls.

As he flagged down an okada and was ready to mount the seat, he noticed that a man was following him. At first he was afraid, thinking the man was one of those “dread boys” who mug passers-by and snatch their belongings. But he dismissed his fears because there were many people around, and he concluded that it would be suicidal for any one to try to carry out such a task at such a time.

Before he could mount the okada, his backpack was grabbed from behind. He thought his fears had been confirmed, but he was wrong. He looked back and saw that the person who grabbed his backpack was a man he had suspected of trailing him a while ago. He asked the man why. The man simply told him to disembark from the okada and to follow him.

“You are under arrest,” said the man. Fatade was surprised and asked what he had done. He was told that his interceptor was a police officer who was on “stop and search duty,” that he was under suspicion, and that he should open his backpack and let the man, who had now identified himself as a policeman, see what was inside.

Fatade disembarked and opened his backpack to show its contents. The policeman rummaged through it and pointed at the laptop inside it. He asked to see the receipt for the laptop. Fatade told him it was bought over a year ago in the United States, where he had gone on a Ford Foundation scholarship, and that the kind of receipt issued to him was akin to the type given to you when you go to an eatery to buy snacks.

The officer said that was impossible and that Fatade must produce a receipt or follow him to the police station to prove that it was not stolen. Fatade was sure it was not stolen, therefore he followed the police officer. As they

were approaching the police station, the officer tried several times to persuade him to not go to the station; he said Fatade's laptop would be seized since it had no receipt.

According to Fatade, "As we crossed the road and at the entrance gate of the general hospital near the police station, he (the police officer) said: 'You know they will delay you at the station or even ask you to write a statement. Why don't you settle me (offer a bribe) before we reach the place?' I told him not to worry and that he should just let me go since I own my laptop — so what's the problem?"

Fatade thinks his confidence and the later revelation that he is a journalist saved him from being detained unnecessarily. However, John Onyeachu, who also resides in Lagos, was not that lucky.

Sometime last year, Onyeachu drove his car into another vehicle. The driver of the other car happened to know a police officer, whom he phoned immediately. In no time, two policemen appeared on the scene of the accident and, without asking for any explanations, bundled Onyeachu into their van and took him to the station. Onyeachu was detained for three days without his family knowing where he was. He had to bribe the policemen and repair the car he hit before he was released on the fourth day.

These two experiences reflect the way the Nigerian Police have continued to use unwholesome tactics to perpetuate corruption and abuse of power, even after the return of the country to democratic governance.

Corruption has become endemic in the country. It is so bad that every segment of life has become permeated by it, from buying fuel at filling stations to going to government offices to do something as simple as getting an official to sign a document. For an office assistant to pass a file from one office to another, his palms have to be greased or the officer responsible may never be on "seat" to act on it.

Cases of students cheating at exams and teachers exchanging grades for sex are rampant. Many parents have taken it upon themselves to pay teachers to allow their wards to cheat on examinations. The thinking here is that politicians, the police, civil servants and so on use their offices to commit wrongdoing, therefore the teachers, too, must use their positions to get extra income because they are not in a position to receive government contracts.

In its yearly publication of corrupt activities in the country, the Independent Advocacy Project (IAP), a leading anti-corruption group, named the Nigerian Police the most corrupt institution in the country. In its Nigeria Corruption Index 2007, it cited the force as leading the pack of corrupt agencies in the country.

This report has gone a long way to confirm the perception of many citizens, who don't view the institution as a public service so much as a public nuisance. For instance, Akinbode Oluwafemi, a former journalist who's now a social development worker and activist, has declared "personal war" against the police for unnecessarily harassing him and accusing him of stealing his own car.

Early this year, after a long, hard day at the office, the only thing on Oluwafemi's mind was to get home to his wife, eat his supper and go to bed. At about 11:30 p.m., as he was driving home, a policeman flagged him down with a dull flashlight and asked for his vehicle's particulars.

Two things about the roadblock struck Oluwafemi as abnormal: The location, down an odd and dark stretch of the road; and the hour, so late at night. For fear of being shut down if he refused to obey the order, he stopped and gave the vehicle document to the policeman with the flashlight that could have used a new battery. The officer looked at the particulars and asked for the hood to be opened for him so he could confirm that the engine numbers were correct.

The policeman then "detected" that there were discrepancies in the engine numbers written on the documents and those inscribed on the engine. He asked Oluwafemi to follow them to the station to write a statement saying where he got the car. After a long argument, Oluwafemi was asked to "settle" them and go. He refused and, after threatening to abandon his car with them and pick it up the next day at the station, one of them saw the press sticker on the car and asked whether he was a journalist.

"I told them I was, and that was what saved me," Oluwafemi said. He said he was let off because he identified himself as a journalist; he wonders what would have happened if he was not so identified. He continued, "I wonder what engine number he wanted to check at such a late hour and with a flashlight whose battery was barely able to provide any form of light."

Successive police inspectors general have issued several orders banning members of the force from indiscriminate

arrest and harassment of citizens, but these orders are largely ignored. It is routine for senior police officers to issue orders that their subordinates ignore. The question ordinary citizens often ask is “Why this is so?” The answer that most give is that the orders are not meant to be obeyed — they are only issued to assuage public anger and make them feel the police are against such illegalities. For instance, recently some girls were arrested in the Lagos metropolis for “indecent dressing.” What came out of this was that the police arrested ladies indiscriminately and extorted money from them.

The belief of the public is that the police continue to do this and get away with it because their senior officials directed them to extort innocent citizens and “make returns” to them, e.g., give them part of the proceeds from such illegal acts. As of now, the fact that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission is only focusing its activities on the political class has also not helped to throw some fear into the police force and the general populace. Many view the war on corruption as only directed against politicians, not all citizens. This has, therefore, allowed the cancer of corruption to fester.

Besides the police, the IAP report listed the Power Holding Company of Nigeria, the Education Ministry (particularly higher institutions and examination bodies) and the Customs Service as other corrupt agencies.

The recent investigation of the immediate past inspector general of police, Sunday Ehindero, over an alleged attempt to smuggle out of the force headquarters a whopping 21 million naira (US\$167,000), and the continued trial of some former governors have strengthened the belief of many citizens that it is no longer fashionable to openly demand bribes in the country. These actions, they believe, would effectively curb corruption and bring sanity to the system because, in the past, highly placed individuals involved in such acts have never been tried.