A letter from Kuje Prison, Nigeria  
Published on Pambazuka News (https://www.pambazuka.org)

INTRODUCTION, BY SABELLA OGBOBODE ABIDDE

The Kuje Prison is located in Abuja, Nigeria. Though not as well-known as the Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison in Lagos, its notoriety is growing. In the 1990s, Kuje established its unsavory reputation as the place pro-democracy activists and critics of government were sent by the military regime.

Smuggling letters out of prison is not new. From the moment governments and governing authorities began constructing and imprisoning people, detainees and sympathizers have been smuggling letters and other items in and out of those horrible confinements. This was true of labour camps and prisons in places like North Korea and Communist China and Nazi-Germany, and in those horrible Soviet Gulags. This is also true of any system anywhere in the world.

Contrary to what the Nigerian government or the Nigerian Prisons Service may tell you, the Nigerian prisons are not the place people go to get rehabilitated or get re-oriented. In many cases, it has nothing to do with justice. In fact, the vast majority of those who are sent there go there to suffer, to get dehumanized, and or to die (mentally or physically). Often, government sends individuals to jail without just cause. They may do so using the cover of the Judiciary to detain people for long and inhumane period. This is the case with Mr. Charles Tonbra Okah.

Charles is being detained – not because the Goodluck Jonathan government has a shred of credible evidence against him regarding the Independence Day Bombing or any other criminal or terroristic activity – but because he is Henry Okah’s brother. What follows is a letter written by Mr. Charles Okah and which was smuggled out of Kuje prison.

**************************************************************************

Charles T. Okah November 19, 2012
Single Cell Block
Kuje Prison
Abuja, Nigeria.

His Eminence
Cardinal Olubunmi Okogie
C/o Catholic Church Secretariat
Lagos, Nigeria.

Your Eminence:

OCTOBER 1, 2010 BOMB BLAST SETUP AND GOVERNMENT DOUBLE STANDARD

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I hope this letter meets you well. The reasons I choose to direct this letter to you are that I am a Catholic and you are an old boy of my alma mater, St. Gregory’s College, Lagos.

I write from Kuje Prison Abuja where two other Catholics and I have been languishing in solitary confinement for two years on trumped-up charges relating to the October 1, 2010 bomb attack claimed by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

My name is Charles Tonbra Okah, aka Billy Bones. On October 16, 2010 my residence in Apapa GRA was invaded by operatives of the State Security Services on the warrant that I was the suspected spokesman for MEND using the pseudonym “Jomo Gbomo.” My eldest son, visiting from the United States where he attends the University of Kansas (KU) was also arrested.

At the SSS Headquarters Abuja where we were flown to blindfolded with our legs and hands bound, my ‘cooperation’ was solicited for something completely different, to my surprise. My captors threw
me a lifeline; offering me our freedom and a lucrative contract in exchange for false testimony against my younger brother Henry, who is resident in South Africa. I was to write a false statement claiming to have been told by Henry about the bomb plot and naming the following persons as his conspirators: Former Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida, Chief Raymond Dokpesi, Mallam Nasir El Rufai, Chief Timipre Sylva, and Dr. Emmanuel Uduaghan. I bluntly refused.

To maintain pressure on me, I was told that my son would be implicated in the bomb matter, my containers of legitimate imports then at the Tin Can Port would be impounded and my business destroyed. I still did not budge, tossing their lifeline back with royal disdain.

When they realized I was not going to connive in their scheme, they became formal and reverted to the main reason for my arrest. I was asked for the MEND password which I told them I did not know. They bound me in a chair, took off my trousers and clamped a device to my penis. My legs were then put inside a basin of water. The device when turned on passed a high voltage of electricity to my body and I lost consciousness. This was on Monday October 18 at about 6pm. When I regained consciousness, I discovered I was at the National Hospital emergency room. I remember the doctors asking why I had trauma marks on my chest where the SSS doctor performed Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). The SSS operatives were evasive in answering questions at the hospital. That night I was released and taken to rest for the night at the State House Clinic. That was the last time a torture was carried out on me.

My son was eventually released after Mr. Femi Falana visited in the company of my wife after a month of being denied access to a lawyer. However, my containers have been impounded up to date and my bank account frozen.

The SSS stopped asking about the MEND password after Jomo Gbomo made another statement while I was in their custody but still refused to let me go because I did not cooperate earlier with them. Meanwhile in the ongoing trial in South Africa, Henry is accused of being the same Jomo Gbomo by the same people who say I am JG.

DOUBLE STANDARDS IN KUJE PRISON

On December 24, 2010 we were remanded in Kuje Prison as a result of our application to be removed from the SSS detention cell. Unknown to us, the SSS passed instructions from “above” to the prison authorities to carry out “special treatment” in order to stampede us into a trial towards conviction. For two years we have been locked up in solitary confinement, are not allowed to exercise or get sunlight outside and are forced to sleep on the floor when bunk beds are available. Even a court order by Justice Gabriel Kolawole to the prison for a change in our confinement style was ignored after it was superseded by an “order from above.”

In late 2011, while locked up inside our cell block, prison officials clothed in protective apparel, face masks and gloves carried out fumigation without opening for us to wait outside. Our protests fell on deaf ears and by the time they were finished we were in distress. The Youth Corper doctor on call tried her best within her limits to the emergency she was confronted with. The poisonous gas and barbaric action reminiscent of the Nazi concentration camp infamous gas chambers eventually led to the death of one Francis Osuwo, aka Gboko, also roped into this case by the SSS and a man I have never met before. Interestingly, the four persons in detention were strangers to each other except for one Obi Nwabueze who is a family friend and close associate of Henry.

The fumigant whose chemical constituents were never relayed to us has affected my neurological system and I have been on a daily prescription of strong neurological medication prescribed by a neurologist of the National Hospital, Professor Bwala.

While the Boko Haram suspects at Kuje prison are allowed to worship in the prison mosque, we have never set foot in the prison chapel. They are also enjoying privileges such as cable television, radio, liberty to move within the prison walls, bunk beds to sleep on and phone calls to their families. We are denied all of the above.

When I asked the current Controller of FCT Command the reason for the disparity, he said “the fear
of Boko Haram is the beginning of wisdom.” He further said the Moslem community was concerned about their welfare in custody.

DOUBLE STANDARDS IN THE COURT

Even in the courts where justice is supposed to be blind, the double standards are glaring. While Senator Ndume, accused of being a financier of Boko Haram, was given bail by the same judge presiding over our case, we have been denied bail.

I understand that this Senator was permitted by the same court to travel on his religious obligation to Mecca for the lesser Hajj while we are refused from attending mass in a chapel less than 50 meters from our cell block.

The court is willing to permit the Senator to travel abroad for his medical check up if he can provide proof that such check up is not done locally. Meanwhile, I have been denied my application to go on a compulsory check up which in my case is mandatory for a kidney donor, having donated my left kidney to my mother 30 years ago.

Our cases have been adjourned repeatedly for cruelly long durations. The last time I appeared in court was March 2012 and the next adjourned date is January 31, 2013, that is if that date will not be shifted again under a flimsy excuse.

All we ask is for free and fair justice from an independent Judiciary that should release us instead of holding us as scapegoats over an obvious power show. While this government continues holding us hostage, our families are becoming destitute.

Our right to freely worship as Catholics is being infringed by the state who have more respect for Islam when all religions should be treated equally.

DOUBLE STANDARDS IN THE POLITY

The National Security Adviser, Col Sambo Dasuki (rtd.) was quoted as saying that the government of President Goodluck Jonathan has the phone numbers of suspected Boko Haram sponsors. Later the Inspector General of Police said certain individuals had been put on a “watch list” as suspected Boko Haram sponsors.

Now the big question is why did the government not simply have our phone numbers and put us also on its “watch list” while we move about freely? They did not hesitate to arrest us, clamp us on trumped-up charges and detain us on flimsy excuses. They did not merely talk, they took action even in South Africa where my brother was arrested since 2010. Is there a better word to describe this other than hypocrisy?

The same government eager to negotiate with Boko Haram who claimed responsibility for over 100 attacks where Catholics have suffered the brunt, has refused to negotiate with MEND and continue to delude themselves that all is well.

Why would this government expect Boko Haram to unmask its leaders and negotiate when they can see that perceived leaders and supporters of MEND are being persecuted and jailed?

I welcome a fact-finding visit from the Church in the company of credible human rights groups to verify our allegations.

On the two occasions Kuje Prison was visited by the bishop of Abuja during the Christmas of 2010 and 2011, he was surreptitiously steered away from where we are held hostage and I believe he has no idea of what is going inside Kuje prison.

Our prayer is that leaders of our Churches will be more sensitive and proactive in politics of the land that touches the lifes of their followers and not leave delicate issues solely in the hands of corrupt and selfish politicians, and majority of the population rid of a “Potiphar” mentality who believe lies
when told by SSS.

May God save our beloved country.

Yours Sincerely,

Charles T. Okah

CC: Pope Benedict, Vatican, Rome
Catholic Bishop of Abuja Diocese, Abuja FCT

“I...was...sick...and in prison, and you visited me.”
-Mathew 25. 35, 36

* BROUGHT TO YOU BY PAMBAZUKA NEWS

* Please do not take Pambazuka for granted! Become a [Friend of Pambazuka](https://www.pambazuka.org/en/friends.php) [2] and make a donation NOW to help keep Pambazuka FREE and INDEPENDENT!

* Please send comments to [editor@pambazuka.org](mailto:editor@pambazuka.org) [3] or comment online at [Pambazuka News](http://www.pambazuka.org/) [4].

**Categories:** [Features](https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3272) [5]
**Issue Number:** [610](https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/8280) [6]

Charles Okah has been in prison for two years over what he believes are trumped-up charges. He has suffered torture and inhumane treatment in the hands of heartless prison officers. Meanwhile the wheels of justice turn ever so slowly

**Category:** [Governance](https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3274) [7]
**Country:** [Nigeria](https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3284) [9]

**Source URL:** [https://www.pambazuka.org/node/83412](https://www.pambazuka.org/node/83412)

**Links:**
[1] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/8281
[3] mailto:editor@pambazuka.org