**Let not this fire spread!**

JANUARY 10, 2012 BY CHINUA ACHEBE, J.P. BEKEDEREMO-CLARK AND WOLE SOYINKA [1 COMMENT](http://www.punchng.com/opinion/let-not-this-fire-spread/#comments)

The fears we have all secretly nursed are coming to realisation. The nightmare we have hugged to our individual breasts, voicing them only in family privacy, or within trusted caucuses of friends and colleagues – lest they become instances of materialising evil thoughts – has finally burst through into our social, physical environment. Rumblings and veiled threats have given way to eruption, and the first cracks in the wall of patience and forbearance can no longer be wished away. Boko Haram is very likely celebrating its first tactical victory: Provoking retaliation in some parts of the nation.

We insist however that this need not be, and should not be so. And as long as any part, however minuscule, opts for the more difficult path of envisioned forbearance, we are convinced that its responses will find neighbour emulation between homesteads, between towns and villages, between communities on all levels and indeed – states. This hard, demanding, but profoundly moral and heroic option will be recognised and embraced as the only option for the survival, and integrity of the whole. All who claim to be leaders must lead – but in the right direction!

We urge a proactive resolve in all such claimants to leadership. It is not sufficient to make pious pronouncements. All who possess any iota of influence or authority, who aspire to moral leadership must act now to douse the first flickers of ‘responses in kind’ even before they are manifested, and become contagious. We urge that, beginning from now, leaders become true leaders in all communities, utilise the platforms of their associations, professions, clubs, places of instruction and places of worship, NGOs and other civic organisations, that they relentlessly spread the manifesto of Community – capital letters! – as an all-embracing human bond, and refuse to be sucked into the cauldron of mutual attrition that is the purpose of the religious warmongers among us.

What is proposed here is not any doctrine of submission, of ‘turning the other cheek’, or supine supplication to divine intervention etc. Very much the contrary! Self-defence is a fundamental human right and responsibility. However, we caution that we must place the total humanity of our nation above the methods and intent of a mindless, though programmed minority that is resolved to set religion against religion; community against community; destroy the internal cohesion of homes; render meaningless the very concept and imperatives of guest, strangers, the extended human family; and the universalist obligations of hosts as practised under the finest traditions of human encounters. Our duty is to denounce the killers among us; to deny them, right from source, the sump of blood that is their nourishment; the chaos that is their ambition; and the hatred that has poisoned their collective psyche. Our mission is to prove ourselves superior to them in understanding; to leap ahead of their perverse scheming and preserve our own humanity even as they jettison theirs – if ever they even were aware of its existence.

Calls have been made in the past – sometimes in response to a crisis within the nation, other times as an objective necessity even in the most tranquil of times – for the convening of a National Sovereign Conference to debate just how the nation should proceed in reinforcing civic and political life, and decide, in full freedom, the terms of her integrated existence. The government is urged to stop shying away from this project, pretending that those who happen to have been elected into the nation’s legislatures are best qualified to undertake the exercise, largely through piecemeal tinkering. This surely begs the question, since the very system and terms under which these – often dubiously – elected, serve, including the intolerable strain these institutions place upon the nation’s resources – are all at issue. That last indeed, the very inordinate exaction of running a presidential system, forms part of the impatience of the public, as new avenues for economic hardship are opened in a people’s struggle for survival, such as the recent crisis of the removal of petroleum subsidy. We call upon the government to re-think this measure. We warn the security forces to recall that their primary duty is to protect all citizens, and most especially those in opposition to government policies, in the exercise of their democratic rights. We cannot turn a blind eye to the killing of our fellow citizens even before the earliest manifestation of popular discontent gets under way. The first single security notch on the gun is always the signal for a countdown towards two, then three, moving to four figure statistics in the struggle for human dignity. Syria is our current cautionary instance. We know how Libya ended.

The security agencies of government should recognise where their urgent and immediate capabilities and competence are needed, where the greatest threat to nationhood since the Nigerian Civil War has been gloatingly launched, and with a daily toll of casualties of the innocent. We call upon the Nigerian government to intensify its obligations to protect the citizenry it claims to govern. The basic professional strategy of preventive policing, which appears no longer in fashion, must be re-activated. Security may appear less glamorous than the moral imposition that is articulated in appeals such as this, but it is nonetheless a crucial partner in the very existence of civil existence and the preservation of civic dignity. Necessary measures to curb the activities of a homicidal few, no matter under what name, faceless or disguised, whose minds have been warped beyond recovery, must be taken, and without flinching. Public evidence of the effectiveness of such measures makes our call for restraint meaningful. It reduces the stress placed daily on a people’s aspirations to a visionary fortitude, and reinforces the resolve for an engagement under forbearance in the ultimate pursuit of social justice as the foundation of peaceful co-existence.

This Appeal comes from Three Survivors of the Pioneering Writer/Teacher Generation of a half-century, post-Independence Nigeria, in her continuous struggle for a viable Nation-Being: Profs.

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