

Col. Dimka's Failed Coup Attempt of February 13, 1976

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Just before 8:30 a.m. on February 13, 1976, the following curious announcement was heard on Radio Nigeria:

"Good morning fellow Nigerians, This is Lt. Col. B. Dimka of the Nigerian Army calling. I bring you good tidings. Murtala Muhammed's deficiency has been detected. His government is now overthrown by the young revolutionaries. All the 19 military governors have no powers over the states they now govern. The states affairs will be run by military brigade commanders until further notice.

All commissioners are sacked, except for the armed forces and police commissioners who will be redeployed. All senior military officers should remain calm in their respective spots. No divisional commanders will issue orders or instructions until further notice. Any attempt to foil these plans from any quarters will be met with death. You are warned, it is all over the 19 states.

Any acts of looting or raids will be death. Everyone should be calm. Please stay by your radio for further announcements. All borders, air and sea ports are closed until further notice. Curfew is imposed from 6am to 6pm. Thank you. We are all together."

Just prior to this broadcast, then Head of State, General Murtala Ramat Muhammed, along with his ADC (Lt. Akinsehinwa), Orderly and driver, had been assassinated on his way to work in a thin skinned black Mercedes Benz car without escorts. The unprotected car had slowed down at the junction in front of the Federal Secretariat in Ikoyi, Lagos, when a hit team which allegedly included Lt. William Seri and others, casually strolled up and riddled it with bullets.

Following confirmation of Muhammed's death, **Lt. Col. Buka Suka Dimka**, of the Army Physical Training Corps, who (along with some others) had been up for most of the night drinking champagne, then made a quick trip to the British High Commission at about 8 am where he demanded to be put in touch with General Gowon in Britain.

He allegedly left a message through Sir Martin LeQuesne, saying Gowon should proceed to Togo and await further instructions. Then he returned, initially accompanied by six others, to Ikoyi to seize the Radio Station. The martial music played was allegedly specially selected by a civilian worker, Mr. Abdulkarim Zakari, who had been alerted before hand to do so.

Other hit teams simultaneously went after other key functionaries of the regime's trioka, namely the Chief of Staff, SHQ, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo and the Army Chief, Lt. Gen. T. Y. Danjuma. The Military Governors of Kwara and Oyo States, Colonels Ibrahim Taiwo and David Jemibewon, respectively, were also targeted. Taiwo, who had been the national coordinator of the July 1975 coup that brought Mohammed to power, was abducted and killed by a team led by Major K. K. Gagara. Jemibewon, whose name had been added to the list of targets by Lt. Col T. K. Adamu, merely because Adamu "did not like his face", escaped.

In response to a pro-coup broadcast (and other activities) from Benin-City by the Brigade Commander, Colonel Isa Bukar, counter-broadcasts dissociating other army units from the coup were made, first from Calabar by the Brigade Commander, **Colonel Mamman J. Vatsa**, and then from Kaduna on behalf of the GOC, **Brigadier Alani Akinrinade**.

As efforts were being made within the military to crush the revolt, University students in Lagos and Ibadan (among others) took to the streets to protest the coup. Later, when it became known that Dimka had visited the British High Commission on the day of the coup, some students attacked British and American facilities in Lagos.

The coup attempt eventually failed seven hours later, crushed by forces rallied and directed from a temporary base at Bonny camp by **Lt. General T. Y. Danjuma**, Chief of Army Staff, whose designated assassin (reportedly Lt. Lawrence Garba) had chosen at the last moment to spare him at the Marina Jetty, allegedly in part to avoid collateral casualties.

When Danjuma got to the office and heard the radio broadcast, he held a brief "war council" with Colonels Bali and Babangida, then moved to Bonny camp to coordinate the resistance. Babangida was sent on a motor cycle to Ikeja Cantonment to get armoured vehicles. Supported by these vehicles he proceeded to Radio Nigeria, where he had a conversation with his close friend Dimka.

Dimka's initial reaction to Babangida's arrival was to ask him if he came to play "Chukwuma and Nwawo" with him; drawing a historical parallel with the negotiations between Colonel Conrad Nwawo (on behalf of Ironsi) and Major Patrick Nzeogwu in Kaduna in January 1966. However, Dimka got concerned with the presence of armored vehicles in the background and asked them to be withdrawn.

But it turns out that Babangida's orders had not been to negotiate a surrender or other outcome, but to stop the broadcast - by any means necessary - including destruction by shelling. When he made contact with Bonny Camp to report his activities at the radio station, this order was reiterated to him by General Danjuma, incredulous that a conversation with Dimka had even occurred and that the radio station was still playing Dimka's broadcast. A brief but fierce fire fight (reportedly led by Major Chris Ugokwe) subsequently dislodged the coup plotters from the station.

When shooting started Dimka simply walked away, past all the soldiers surrounding the building as well as driving through numerous checkpoints on his way, first to Jos and then eventually to Abakaliki where he was captured by Police in the company of a woman of easy virtue. At that time, public incredulity at his "escape" from Radio Nigeria led to speculations that he was assisted. But many years later, in April 1990, a similar

'escape' from a siege of supposedly loyal troops was executed by **Lt. Col. Tony Nyiam** and Major Saliba Mukoro.

General Olusegun Obasanjo (rtd) has written that he was late in leaving home that day on account of a visit by Brigadier Olu Bajowa to get a name for his new baby. When it became apparent that there was trouble, Obasanjo executed an escape and evasion maneuver, spent most of the day at the house of a civilian friend in Ikoyi monitoring the situation by telephone, but later emerged to become the Head of State.

His would be assassins mistook then Colonel Dumuje for him along Awolowo road in Lagos, seriously wounding that officer. The specifics of how that happened remain a matter of conjecture particularly since the car of a Lt. General would have had three stars mounted on the license plate. Whether Dumuje was riding in Obasanjo's car is a curious possibility that has never been clarified. Or perhaps the hit men were drunk and could not tell one flag from another.

Subsequent evidence, allegedly based on documents and tapes discovered at the station, suggests that Dimka had actually planned a second broadcast which he never got to make. The broadcast would have gone like this:

"Fellow Nigerians,

This is Lt. Col. BS Dimka. I now explain why we the Young Revolutionaries of the Armed Forces have found it necessary to overthrow the six month old government of Murtala. On the 29th July 1975 the Government of General Gowon was overthrown. Some of the reasons given for the change were:

- a. Corruption
- b. Indecision
- c. Arrest and detention without trial
- d. Weakness on the part of the Head of State
- e. Maladministration in general and a host of other malpractice.

Every honest Nigerian will agree with me that since the change over of government there has not been any physical development in the whole country generally. All we have is arbitrary dismissal of innocent Nigerians who have contributed in no less amount to the building of this great nation. A Professor was arrested, detained, dismissed and later taken to court on an article which every honest Nigerian will agree that all the points contained in that article were 100% truth. The sad point about it all is that those who initiated the retirement or dismissal exercise are the worst offenders. You will be informed about the ill-gotten wealth in my next announcement.

The acting General Manager of the Nigerian Airways was invited to the Dodan Barracks and detained without trial. The people of this country have been living in a state of fear. The Armed Forces promotion exercise is still fresh in your minds. Whatever reasons they have for the promotion one can only say that they are ambitious. They in fact took over power to enrich themselves.

We are convinced that some of the programmes announced for a return to civilian rule are made to favor a particular group. To mention only one. Maitama Sule is a politician. But has been appointed Chief of Commissioners for Complaints. This is to prepare him for the next political head at all cost. How many of you know that Maitama Sule is on a salary of N17,000 p.a.?

In view of what I have just said and a lot more which time will not permit me to mention, we the Young Revolutionaries have once again taken over the Government to save Murtala from total disgrace and prevent him from committing further blunders and totally collapsing the country before he runs away in the name of retirement to enjoy the huge fortune he got through bribe which he has now stored outside this country. I believe that charity should begin at home.

Please stay by your radio for further announcements.

We are all together."

The Obasanjo regime, however, later issued a public statement proffering its own explanation for the Dimka coup attempt. The four reasons given by the government were that :

1. The plotters felt the Murtala government was abandoning Nigeria's traditional non-aligned posture and going "communist".
2. The plotters were opposed to recent Army promotions and the appointment of Danjuma as Army Chief.
3. The plotters intended to restore General Gowon to office
4. The plotters intended to restore all previous military governors to office, as well as restore all retired public servants back to office. Any subsequent retirement was to be based on legal due process. (As of that time about 11,000 civil servants and over 200 army officers had been summarily retired across the country)

Seven days of national mourning were declared and flags flew at half mast.

Following up on the opinion of the Obasanjo regime at the time, that General Gowon "knew and by implication, approved" of the plot (based on Dimka's testimony regarding a brief encounter during a trip he had earlier made to London), a formal request for him to be extradited from Britain was made on March 24, 1976.

General Gowon himself strongly denied the charge. The British government rejected the extradition request and made it plain through back-channels that if the Nigerian government insisted too strongly on getting Gowon back, Nigerian leaders should be prepared to deal with British coldness if (as individuals) they one day found themselves in exile.

Publicly, diplomatic relations with Britain, however, took a nose dive and Gowon, without trial, was dismissed as an officer (albeit retired) in the Nigerian Armed Forces. (He was later reinstated by President Shagari).

As expected, mass arrests were made after the coup failed, not just of active duty and retired soldiers, but also civilians. Major C.D. Dabang, an inner circle officer who had pleaded with Dimka to delay the coup until he was well enough to take part, was still undergoing treatment at the Military Hospital in Lagos when soldiers arrived, disconnected his drip and took him away. Many important figures of the Gowon era were arrested and quizzed. There is at least one, known to this author, who is very lucky to be alive today.

At least two Boards of Inquiry sat (including those chaired by Brigadiers Obada and Eromobor). Death sentences passed by a separate Special Military Tribunal were confirmed by the Supreme Military Council. However, it remains unclear to this day to what extent certain individuals who were shot were actually involved in the Dimka coup. Among others, Col A.D.S. Wya is frequently mentioned.

The first batch of executions was announced by Brigadier Shehu Yar'Adua, who had just been double promoted from the rank of Lt. Col. He went on television (Channel 10) to say "They are being shot about now". This was followed the next morning by a gleeful headline in the Daily Times that read: "Thirty-Two shot in Round One". Another batch, including Dimka himself, was to follow later.

However, two NCOs, Sergeant Clement Yildar and Corporal Dauda Usman escaped and were never found. They were declared wanted. To this day, they have not (to my knowledge) surfaced.

Those executed included:

1. Major General I.D. Bisalla (Defence Commissioner)
2. Joseph Gomwalk (Ex-Governor of Benue-Plateau)

3. Col. A.D.S. Wya
4. Col Isa Bukar
5. Lt. Col. T.K. Adamu
6. Lt. Col A.B. Umoru
7. Lt. Col B.S. Dimka
8. Lt. Col. Ayuba Tense
9. Major C.D. Dabang
10. Major Ola Ogunmekan
11. Major J.W. Kasai
12. Major J.K. Afolabi
13. Major M.M. Mshelia
14. Major I.B. Rabo
15. Major K.K. Gagara
16. Capt. M.R. Gotip
17. Capt. M. Parvwang
18. Capt. J.F. Idi
19. Capt. A.A. Aliyu
20. Capt. S. Wakian
21. Capt. Austin Dawurang
22. Lt. A.R. Aliyu
23. Lt. William Seril
24. Lt. Mohammed
25. Lt. E.L.K. Shelleng
26. Lt. O. Zagmi
27. Lt. S. Wayah
28. Lt. S. Kwale
29. Lt. Peter Cigari
30. Lt. Lawrence Garba
31. Seven (7) non-commissioned officers
32. Mr. Abdulakarim Zakari (civilian broadcaster)

Others were retired or dismissed or imprisoned. General Gowon's relatives in the armed forces were hounded out or jailed. But in 1981 a former member of the SMC, **Lt. Gen Alani Akinrinade** (rtd) openly admitted in an interview with the Punch newspaper that there wasn't a strong case against General Gowon.

SOME SHORT AND LONG TERM CONSEQUENCES

Although the new Obasanjo led team that came to office (against Obasanjo's "personal wish and desire") pledged to continue along the footsteps of Muhammed, the so-called Dimka coup had lasting military and non-military, judicial, domestic and foreign policy effects.

It was the first time since the executions of Banjo, Ifeajuna, Alale and Agbam on September 25, 1967 in Enugu, by Ojukwu, that anyone was being executed for that alleged offence within Nigeria's colonial borders. It led to the promulgation - by the Obasanjo regime - of certain retrospective decrees which made 'concealment of treason' an offence punishable with a life sentence.

The regime created new "Special Military Tribunal" laws justifying mass executions for coup participation which have remained with us until the recent initiative in the Legislature.

Indeed, when General Obasanjo (rtd) was tried in 1995 on suspicion of concealment of treason by the Abacha regime, it was the law he signed into effect just under 20 years before, which was pulled off the shelf and used to charge him.

It later emerged that the charge was frivolous and he was lucky to survive the Abacha gulag. However, it did not escape notice that others charged under that decree in the past may not have been so lucky. Indeed notions of Treason and Treasonable felony in Nigerian Military Tribunal Law and their consistency with the governing laws of Nigeria still need to be revisited. And the complex intrigues of the coup investigative process

also need to be addressed. There are people who were officially cleared of all charges relating to the Dimka coup in 1976 who still barely escaped getting shot "on contract" at Kiri-Kiri prison.

The Dimka coup was a national security embarrassment. Efforts by then Inspector General of Police, MD Yusuf, to resign were rebuffed. But the coup led directly to the creation of the National Security Organization (NSO), whose first Director, then Brigadier Abdulai Mohammed was recalled from his post as a Governor. However, the existence (since 1976) of the NSO and its by-product, the SSS, has not stopped coups in Nigeria, as events since then have demonstrated.

Except for the use of Peugeot cars, the so called "low profile" policy of the Muhammed regime was largely jettisoned. Key figures became better protected by accompanying troops. The Brigade of Guards was disbanded and new troops rotated in.

The leadership style of the regime changed. Muhammed's hard charging, occasionally impulsive style was replaced by a steadier and level headed but still dictatorial approach. Then Brigadier Shehu Yar'Adua's new role in the Trioka as Chief of Staff, SHQ, launched him into his subsequent national political career when he left office. Other relationships forged in the trials and tribulations of the painful events surrounding the Dimka coup were to last for many years after - such as that between President Olusegun Obasanjo, his Defence Minister, Lt. Gen. TY Danjuma (rtd) and his Chief of Staff, Major General Abdulai Mohammed (rtd).

Although already known for toughness from his July 1966 and civil war days, General Danjuma's stature as "the man in charge of the Army" was reinforced by his bold leadership during the coup. Indeed, he could quite easily have taken over the country if he wanted - assuming meanings would not have been read into it by geopolitical pundits. Then **Colonel Ibrahim Babangida** became a hero for supposedly flushing Dimka out of Radio Nigeria, although the exact nature of his 'negotiation' with Dimka at NBC was never clarified. He was to emerge again on the national scene in 1983 and 1985. It was not until an interview in the Guardian with Lt. Col G.Nyiam in April 2000, that the

unsung role of Col.Chris Ugokwe (rtd) at the radio station that day in 1976 became public knowledge.

The diplomatic effects, particularly on Anglo-Nigerian relations, have been discussed. Both countries recalled their ambassadors and it was not until 1979 that the resident Nigerian High Commissioner in London was replaced.

Domestically, the coup crystallized political tensions between the Moslem far north and the Christian middle belt which were not altogether new, but have persisted in one form or another. As can be recognized, most of those executed were of Plateau State origin. But the curious notion of a 'Plateau group' in the Army never did die. It resurrected many years later as the "Langtang Mafia".

Lastly, it made the late General Murtala Muhammed a hero. According to General James Oluleye who was then Finance Commissioner, quite apart from a state burial, naming monuments after him and fulfilling obligations for his pension and gratuity as a Four Star General, the government infused a large amount of cash directly into his estate to protect his family from future financial embarrassment.