How Cross River Government launched Aircraft they leased claiming to have bought them

Cally Air has always been an albatross for the Government of Cross River State. Ever since the smooth-talking Professor, Benedict Ayade decided in 2017 to establish an airline fully owned by the State, the project has been dogged by controversies. Though it was announced in 2017, the Airline did not take off until four years later. So it literally took four years for Cally Air to take off from the ground. It did take off with one plane, a Boeing 737. But the four- year hiatus has already created the impression of an unserious entity. And like many other projects initiated by high-sounding smooth talking Governor, not much was achieved. The first aircraft, it was later gathered was leased by the State government. Not only that, the fare it charged was not competitive thus travelers easily chose other airlines. As at the time Ayade left office, the Airline had two aircrafts. But there were controversies. First was the former governor's alleged desperate bid to bring IRS Airline into the picture in his last days in office after Aero Contractors had been the one handling the operations and maintenance of the Airline. Newly sworn in, Governor Otu was said to have refused this plea by his predecessor, while insisting a clean start for the airline. Meanwhile, it was also alleged that Aero Contractors which managed the operations for the two years preceding Otu's government were not ready to release the aircrafts it operated with because the State government was owing it 900million Naira. All these were in the background before the Cross River government decided it was time to 'relaunch' Cally Air by acquiring new aircrafts. Here is the snag. In July 2025, the State government announced that it was keen on repositioning Cally Air. Indeed, the Commissioner for Aviation, Imah Utum went on air to celebrate the landmark acquisition of two new aircrafts by the State. Mark my words, 'acquisition'. The acquisition of two CROJ-100 was formally announced by the government of Governor Otu during an interface with the media on Arise Television on 11th August, 2025 by the Aviation Commissioner. Emphasizing on the relaunch, the Captain Imah Utum (Rtd) disclosed that the aim was to make Cally AIR the toast of the country's aviation sector. Then the interview dove-tailed into figures. 'How much did you buy the aircrafts? he was asked and he replied, “32.5 Million Dollars”.

Ordinarily, this did not call for any inquisition. After all, days later, the Nigerian Vice President Shettima was in Calabar to formally launch the reinvigorated Cally AIR with two aircrafts said to have been bought, confirming the claim by the Commissioner. The whole story sounded quite normal until a few days later when an Irish company, AFG Aviation Ireland Limited came up to say that they leased the two aircrafts to the Cross River State Government. According to the leasing company, the aircrafts bearing Manufacturer Seal Serial Number 19004 and 19009 were recently acquired by AFG Aviation ltd from Regional One and placed with Cally Air under a finance lease placement. What this meant was that the aircrafts were indeed owned by AFG Aviation and not Cally AIR as the State Government has made Nigerians especially Cross River people to believe. We took it up with the State Commissioner of Aviation, who ab initio went on air to announce that the State indeed purchased the aircrafts. He neither denied making the statement, nor feigning ignorance of the fact that they were indeed not bought but leased. According to him, the pressure of facing the barrage of questions from his interviewers made him to claim that the State bought the aircraft rather than claiming they were leased. Observers however raised some questions about accountability in governance and how the whole Cally Air saga might end up as another drain pipe for the State resources. If the Aviation Commissioner goofed or was carried away by the euphoria of facing the press hence 'lied' that the State bought two aircrafts which indeed they leased, why would the State Governor, Prince Otu invite Shettima to commission aircrafts knowing fully well that they were not owned by the State, a source asked? Claiming ownership of leased buildings or equipment in other to gain political leverage or popularity may soon be the norm for Nigerian politicians, a Nigerian Leasing Company executive who we sought his opinion concluded with a tone of derision. Meanwhile, in an interaction to ascertain the true status of the aircrafts, the State Aviation Commissioner confessed that the State is expected to pay the 32.5 million dollars cost of the Aircrafts over the next six years.