

Ex-Military Personnel Are Not Enemies -Stop Using Soldiers to Silence Their Grievances

The Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) has condemned in the strongest terms the reported deployment of armed police officers and soldiers to block retired military personnel from peacefully protesting at the Ministry of Defence in Abuja, describing the action as unacceptable, provocative and fundamentally at odds with democratic values.

The prominent Pro-democracy and civil rights advocacy group Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) has asked the minister of Defence General Christopher Musa (rtd) to investigate the incident and put in place a seamless modalities for the retired soldiers to hold consultations with his office so as to resolve their grievances just as the Rights group said it was doubtful if the directive to block the protesting soldiers was made by the minister of Defence himself given that General Musa has a terrific and commendable legacy of being the person who advocated publicly for the improvements of salaries of serving military operatives which led to the recent approval by president Bola Ahmed Tinubu of an unprecedented increment in the salaries of the military operatives.

HURIWA said it was particularly disturbing that men and women who spent their productive years defending the territorial integrity of Nigeria could be confronted by security personnel when they sought to peacefully draw the attention of government to their unresolved pension and welfare grievances. The association asked the Minister of Defence to explain whether he authorized or was aware of the alleged high-handed treatment meted out to the protesting ex-servicemen. Is the Defence Ministry now a no-go area for citizens seeking redress?

Must retired soldiers who defended Nigeria with their lives be treated as security threats simply because they are demanding what they believe they are legitimately owed?

HURIWA said the Federal Government must immediately distinguish between maintaining public order and suppressing legitimate grievances.

According to the association, blocking peaceful protesters from approaching the ministry without creating an avenue for dialogue risks turning a legitimate welfare dispute into an unnecessary confrontation between the state and citizens who served it.

'Do not use force where dialogue is required' HURIWA urged the Defence Minister to immediately invite representatives of the retirees, listen to their grievances and establish a clear mechanism and timeline for addressing their demands. The organisation said the recurring protests by military retirees over pension adjustments, delayed benefits and inadequate post-retirement compensation have become a national embarrassment that successive administrations have failed to permanently resolve. It warned that a government cannot continually praise military personnel for their sacrifices while they are in uniform and then become deaf to their grievances once they retire. "Those who defended Nigeria must not be forced to fight Nigeria before they can be heard." HURIWA said

the current Defence Minister has an opportunity to break this vicious cycle by developing a comprehensive post-service welfare policy rather than waiting for retired personnel to occupy streets before government responds.

HURIWA demands post-retirement economic policy. The rights group called for an institutional framework involving the Ministry of Defence, relevant government agencies, financial institutions and credible private-sector organizations to create sustainable economic opportunities for retired military personnel. Such a framework, it said, should include entrepreneurship support, vocational retraining, access to finance, consultancy opportunities, agricultural ventures, technical employment and other productive schemes capable of restoring dignity and economic independence to retirees.

HURIWA also challenged military authorities to begin preparing personnel for life after active service before retirement, by ensuring that serving officers and other ranks have opportunities to acquire vocational, technical and entrepreneurial skills.

The organisation said it was irrational for the state to spend years training personnel for military and security duties without simultaneously preparing them for a productive transition into civilian life. 'Retirement must not become economic punishment'

HURIWA said the welfare of retired military personnel should be treated as a national security issue. It warned that the way the country treats its veterans sends a powerful message to serving personnel currently risking their lives in the North-East, North-West, North-Central and other theatres of operation. "A soldier fighting terrorism today must have confidence that

the country he is defending will remember him tomorrow." HURIWA therefore demanded an urgent comprehensive review of military pension arrangements, consequential adjustments, gratuities and other post-service benefits. It also called for a transparent engagement between the retirees and relevant government agencies, with clearly defined deadlines for resolving outstanding issues.

'The minister must take responsibility' HURIWA urged the Defence Minister to personally take charge of the situation rather than allowing bureaucratic delays to deepen the frustration of the retirees. The association appealed to the protesters to remain peaceful and law-abiding but insisted that peaceful protest must never be criminalized or treated as an act of hostility against the state.

HURIWA said the government should open the gates, open the dialogue and open a new chapter in the treatment of Nigeria's veterans. "Nigeria cannot celebrate its soldiers when they are useful and abandon them when they become vulnerable. The men and women who defended this country deserve dignity in service and dignity in retirement." HURIWA consequently called on the Defence Ministry to commence immediate consultations with the retirees and relevant government institutions towards establishing a permanent solution to the recurring crisis.

