

## Debt Relief: The Okonjos, the Media and Us

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Monday, 16 January 2006  
Last Updated Monday, 16 January 2006

On January 13, 2006, we published a story entitled, Debt Relief: Nigeria Pays \$100,000 Monthly to Consultants. We had delayed this story for two months to ensure we got as many facts as possible. There had been rumors swirling around the issue of debt relief for Nigeria. It appeared most Nigerians did not know the facts and the few, who knew, were not talking.

For the story and the one preceding it, we had on and off the record interviews with Senators, members of the House of Representatives, the Director-General of Debt Management Office, an International Finance Analyst based in London, two officials of Lazard Freres, sources at the offices of the Minister of Finance and Director-General of the Debt Management Office. We could not reach the Minister of Finance; hence, we sent an email message to the Minister's younger brother with our telephone numbers, asking him to give our numbers to the Minister. In our email, we told Chi-chi Okonjo that we had delayed this story for months, and had, therefore, set a deadline for that week. About a month earlier, we had emailed Chi-chi Okonjo asking for the Minister's office phone numbers as we could not through to her on the listed numbers.

Paul Nwabuikwu, the Minister's spokesman, called this writer the following morning. We could not have any meaningful conversation as the line kept breaking up. I gave him another number to call. About ten minutes later, I received a call on my cell phone. I could not take the call as I was on another call to Abuja on my office line. A call came through my landline while I was still on this call to Abuja. I excused myself from the Abuja call and took this call. The gentleman at the other end introduced himself as Mansui Muhtar, the Director-General (DG) of the Debt Management Office (DMO). In the course of our conversation, which lasted about fifteen minutes, he excused himself three times to attend to some matters as he was boarding a flight to China.

I told DG Muhtar what we were doing and asked him some questions. I also confronted him with some rumors we had heard in the course of investigating this story. He responded to these rumors and we reported his responses along side the rumors. In my mind, we did objective reporting and did not take any position. Our chat with the DG of DMO was very cordial and he acknowledged it in our chat and promised to get in touch with us as soon as he got back from China.

We alleged nothing and took no positions. We simply reported the facts as given to us by people on the Government side as well as mention the rumors out there. We believed our reporting dispelled the rumors. Yet, two days later, our attention was drawn to stories posted on the web sites of some Nigerian media outfits.

The first was a rejoinder written by Chi-chi Okonjo, the Finance Minister's younger brother. It is curious that Chi-chi chose to post his protest of our story on another web site, instead of sending it directly to us. His posting on Nigeriavillagesquare.com was forwarded to us and it is reproduced below:

"My attention has just been drawn to a spurious article written by one Mr. Jonathan Elendu of Elendureports.com in which it is insinuated and/or alleged that I, Chi-Chi Okonjo, was a consultant directly or indirectly to the Federal Government of Nigeria on the debt relief granted Nigeria.

For the avoidance of doubt I am not and my firm, Georgetown Consulting which was founded in 2000, has never been involved, either directly or indirectly, through its principals or collectively or through any agents, in the debt relief granted Nigeria.

In addition, the Honorable Minister of Finance, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala is not involved in Georgetown Consultings business in any shape or form as insinuated in the rumour on Elendureports.com and could not have floated Georgetown Consulting for the purpose of debt relief since our firm was founded in 2000.

Our areas of specialization are: Change Management, Business Process Re-engineering, Strategic Analysis and Strategic Audits, Forensic Accounting and Privatization. Georgetown Consulting has been consulting with agencies like BPE and select South African municipalities and provinces with our partners since 2000."

As stated in our story of the 13th, we called Chi-chi Okonjo several times. Nobody answered his phones. We emailed our questions to him. Chi-chi, instead of responding to our questions, berated us and wanted to know what our motives were.

Shortly after the story was published, Chi-chi emailed us his response to our questions. This was a full day after he wrote the chastising email. We told him we had already gone to press.

Chi-chi Okonjo, in his rejoinder, lied when he said we alleged that he was a consultant to Nigeria on debt relief. We made no such allegations. He admitted to us that he is a consultant to the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE). His name was part of the rumors that were making the rounds. We clearly stated that these were rumors. Our reporting, if anything, absolved Chi-chi Okonjo of involvement in the debt relief deal. Maybe Chi-chi was reacting to a story he expected us to write. Or maybe there is some fire from where the smoke is coming.

The other story in the media is a statement released by the Debt Management Office. A story by Kunle Aderinokun in the Monday, January 16th issue of Thisday, reports the following: "Making this revelation at the weekend, in a reaction to a story by Elendu Reports posted on the internet, which criticized Federal Government for spending monthly the sum of \$250,000 on consultants, DMO described the engagement of consultants as, "standard operating procedure for all countries engaged in seeking debt relief";

The said Elendureports.com story did not quarrel with the payment of fees to consultants. Our story did not mention \$250,000 anywhere. How did Thisday come up with that figure? The Punch on the same day reported the story. They gave the account that the DMO was disputing claims made by Elendureports.com. How can the DMO dispute claims we did not make? Again, any objective reader would have noticed that we reported what was being rumored in Nigeria and gave what we believed was the correct version: The Government's side! Curiously, nobody from the newspapers that reported the Federal Government's rebuttal contacted Elendureports.com for our side of the story. In addition, they refused to respond to our emails.

Some reliable sources have told Elendureports.com that there has been an undeclared war between us and the Nigerian media since we published the story on the Obasanjo largesse to the media. Angered by our "audacity to take on the big boys," some in the Nigerian media have vowed to crush Elendureports.com. According to a source, "Haven't you noticed that they don't carry your stories anymore? You are bad for their business and they will do whatever it takes to bring you down. Expect more bad press from your colleagues in Nigeria." Our investigations confirm what our sources told us.

Dele Momodu, the publisher of Ovation Magazine, allegedly, is leading this campaign. According to some reports, Momodu is said to have told friends that since Elendureports.com came out, people are no longer in a hurry to have their houses and parties splashed on the pages of his magazine. And there are also reports that a group founded by a Nigerian lawyer in the United Kingdom has vowed to lead a boycott of Ovation following Momodu's threats against Elendureports.com.

This is unfortunate. Nigerian newspapers and magazines have used stories from Elendureports.com. We have never asked for anything other than that credit be given to us for stories published by us. This is standard ethical practice in our industry. Even then, some newspapers and magazines do not bother to attribute stories to us, which they copied directly from our web site. This practice is unethical and perhaps even criminal. We have not threatened anybody with lawsuits. It has been our belief that all of us in the media are partners for truth, equity, freedom, and justice for Nigeria and Nigerians anywhere in the world. Hence, we ignore these infringements.

Our commitment to the ideals on which the magazine was founded remains unshaken. We, at Elendureports.com, have never been deterred by intimidation, harassments, blackmail and threats. It is abhorrent to us to engage in any kind of "war" with people whom we respect. But if "war" is what it takes to protect our rights to practice our trade, speak truth freely, and associate with whomever we choose, so be it.

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