

WITH the dramatic rise in oil prices due to OPEC's reduction of production quotas, the petrol prices in the United States have gone up 50% nationally over the last months. The average national cost is now around \$1.50 per gallon, the equivalent of about N40 per litre. Even at that rate, exorbitant in comparison to official pump prices in Nigeria, American drivers are still paying far less for their fuel than are their European and Japanese counterparts.

Due to the strength of the American economy at present, the rise in prices for both petrol and heating oil has not affected American driving or living habits in a major way. Furthermore, the rise in fuel prices has not led to the recession that was feared, and the economy continues to grow apace.

This is a far cry from what developed in the wake of the sudden oil price hike in the early 1970s. In a matter of months in late 1973, oil prices went from \$3 a barrel to \$16, leading to economic booms in countries like Nigeria and economic crises in countries like the United States.

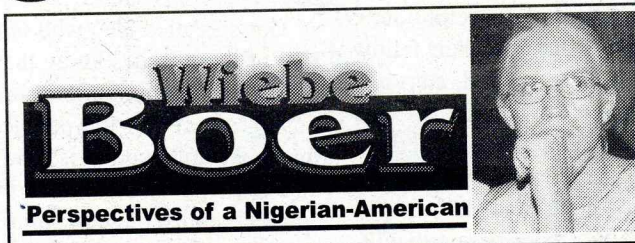
Even though increased oil prices have yet to dramatically harm the American economy, the Clinton administration is sufficiently worried about the effects the increase might have on the upcoming presidential elections.

With this in mind, Energy Secretary (Minister) Bill Richardson was sent on a whirlwind tour to major oil producing nations around the world. His tour included a brief stop in Nigeria during which he tried to convince the Nigerian government to cooperate with the United States and help bring OPEC production quotas back up.

Unfortunately, Richardson's short visit did not allow him the opportunity to learn important lessons from a country that has been forced to creatively deal with continual problems of fuel and transport shortages.

The result of coping with these shortages has been the development of one of the

American individualism vs Nigerian efficiency



•Okada, a major form of transportation in Nigeria

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most efficient public transport systems in the world.

Starting in the 1800s when Nigerian canoes outperformed steam ships on the Niger River, Nigeria has been a centre of creative and efficient transportation initiatives.

Lord Lugard once said that the greatest gift of early

British colonialism to Nigeria was improved transport.

This may be true, but right from the beginning, it was Nigerians who made it work. The first to take advantage of improved road networks through the import and use of commercial vehicles in Nigeria were not Europeans but Nigerians themselves.

Over the next century thousands of kilometres of roads were built and hundreds of thousands of automobiles were imported or assembled in Nigeria. Because of Nigeria's large population, a significant number of whom lived in poverty, the number of cars certainly never came close to the lev-

els known in the United States. Instead, a largely privately owned and initiated system was developed where lorries, luxury buses, vans, and cars of all shapes and sizes were used in a criss-crossing nationwide transport system centred on taxi, bus, and lorry parks.

Although the speeds at which these modes of transport are driven and the number of people crammed into the vehicles may make the system somewhat unsafe, the end result has been an incredibly efficient national public transport network.

There was, however, one missing element. People would still have to walk from their urban or rural compounds to a place where they could get a taxi to take them to the parks. This problem was solved by the *going/okada/achaba* revolution launched in Lafia in 1988.

Now, from almost any point in Nigeria, one can walk outside their compound, climb an *okada* to the nearest taxi park, and get to any destination in Nigeria without any prior planning or scheduling. For that alone, the inventor of the *okada* should be nominated for the Nobel Prize for Economics.

In contrast, the American culture of individualism has created a country where almost everyone who drives owns their own car and drives it without passengers. Even most taxis carry only one pas-

senger at a time.

Furthermore, because of the vast size of the country, outside of the eastern corridor and the mass transit systems within major cities, public transport remains expensive and inefficient.

If traveling by public transport in the United States, one has to carefully schedule and plan trips based on inefficient bus and train networks which makes journeys unnecessarily long and expensive.

I have traveled extensively using public transport through many parts of the United States and over twenty Nigerian states, and I must say that in terms of time, efficiency, and cost, the Nigerian one wins hands down.

So, what might Secretary Richardson have learned if he had actually observed all this?

He would have learned that even without a large portion of the population owning their own vehicles, or a government-run train, subway, and bus system, Nigerians have created a remarkable and efficient transport network.

Furthermore, this system is so fuel efficient that even at times when there were severe petrol shortages, people continued to travel.

In short, rather than trying to encourage oil producing countries to help reduce the price of petrol for the American driver, the United States should instead learn from countries like Nigeria how to manage on a much lower level of fuel consumption. Perhaps most importantly of all, the Nigerian transport system encourages communal interaction while the American one only serves to maintain the stark individualism that makes petrol prices such a major domestic issue any way.

'All is not well with the North'

Continued from Page 13

thing for President Obasanjo is to tackle the problem now.

You see, these Northern sponsors are hell bent on achieving their aims at all cost. If they want peace to reign in Nigeria, the Northern elites know what they have to do. But, if they do not want the peace, it takes them just a few minutes to bring everything down to a standstill. That is why I am telling everybody in this country especially the government, that we have to be on our guards.

How do you think the government can penetrate the hearts of these innocent youths being used for violence all over the country especially the North so as to dissuade them from engaging in conflicts?

The government should first and foremost embark on film production and drama both on the radio and television stations, basically portraying violence as negative. It should be a national issue, where everybody would be involved. Chris-

tians and their Moslem counterparts should equally assist in their preachings and sermons in the churches and mosques.

Then the government should take the poverty alleviation programme seriously. We are fond of starting something in this country but not seeing to its logical conclusion which deters the country's progress.

How do you see the introduction of Sharia as a state religion in Zamfara?

I am a devout Moslem, I was born and bred in Islam, I won't be against my religion. But be that as it may, the way it was introduced in Zamfara and planned to be introduced in other Northern states was very, very suspect. We, that introduced the Sharia do not understand 80 percent of what is contained in the Sharia law. Those who introduced it are ignorant of what they are implementing; as regards the laws as stated in the Sharia. If they do, they would not have announced it as a state law.

If Moslems are now saying they want to introduce Sharia jettisoning the existing penal code, then it is laughable. During the reign of Prophet Mohammed, we know that the Quran was brought through him; you know God sent Angel Gabriel to him. But when his uncle, an unbeliever, was about dying, Prophet Mohammed prayed to God to spare the life of his uncle for a few minutes so that he could be convinced and converted to a Moslem and to say *Kalmasaada*. But God sent Angel Gabriel to Prophet Mohammed to tell him that he has no right to change the religious belief of anybody, explaining that the changing of any human being belongs to Him, God. The religion belongs to God, he is to determine who are His. Immediately, Prophet Mohammed knelt down before God and begged for forgiveness because he knew he had offended God.

There is nowhere in the Quran where it is stated that you

Continued on Page 31