Nigeria @ 50 Special Edition: The Aborted Journey

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As a former United States ambassador to Nigeria, and someone who had lived and worked in Nigeria for three years, Princeton Lyman considers himself a good student of Nigeria whose knowledge of the country places him in good stead to discuss the subject. At a public lecture some months ago, Lyman regaled the audience with what he called his “deep and abiding vital emotional attachment to the Nigerian people,” having served as ambassador in the country and “travelled to and from Nigeria for a number of years.” Of all the Nigerian people’s “magnificence, their courage, artistic brilliance, humour in the face of challenges,” Lyman just couldn’t make sense of the irony of “a major oil producer,” with all its wealth, not being able to develop its infrastructure. Nigeria’s lack of infrastructure, he said, is nothing short of “disgraceful.” Many Nigerians may not consider Lyman’s view an exaggeration, coming from a non Nigerian. Many would agree that Nigeria, indeed, had fallen terribly short of expectation in that regard. Whether in the transport, power or education sector, Nigeria lags behind many other countries, including even its contemporaries in nation building, that is, countries that gained independence at about the same time it did. Part of the irony of the Nigerian situation is that most of the infrastructure inherited from the colonial administration at independence in 1960 was either not developed, or had been left to rot. Examples abound all over, in the different sectors. The state of Nigerian roads, for one, has never ceased to amaze people. According to one Nigerian analyst, Nigerian roads rank among the worst anywhere in the world. This, again, cannot be considered an exaggeration, given the harrowing experiences and agonising tales associated with road travels across the country. The story of Nigerian roads, in recent years, whether federal or state, had dwelled more on their dilapidated state, with gullies and craters as features. According to a recent media report, “only 15 percent of the nation’s road network are in good condition.” There are well over seven million registered vehicles operating on the nation’s roads daily, according to the Federal Road Safety Corps figures as at 1998. Road transport also accounts for over 75 percent of mobility in the country. The issue of bad and ill- maintained roads across the country “cannot but continue to dominate discussions.” Heavy vehicular traffic is not the only reason why many of the roads had failed in recent years. It is also due to the failure of relevant government agencies to maintain the roads on short or long -term basis, the shoddy jobs done by incompetent contractors, or sheer embezzlement of public funds meant for road maintainance or construction. The result is that Nigerian roads had been left to degenerate over the decades. There are many examples of such roads but one stretch of road that had in recent years become a menace to commuters and vehicles is the Benin-Ore expressway. It is the only road, according to one writer, to have “attracted ministerial tears.” He was talking about Dieziani Allison-Madueke, the former minister of works, who visited the area, and probably shocked by the extent of devastation, allowed emotions to get hold of her. But despite shedding tears on the state of the road and promising to fix it, succour was nowhere in sight as many Nigerians who used the road months after Allison-Madueke’s visit, still recounted harrowing experiences. Accidents happened frequently on the road due to the bad state of the route, leading to injuries and death of many people. Some passengers ended up spending longer hours on the road, as a result of traffic gridlock caused by failed portions of the road. Frank Nneji, the managing director of ABC transport, was at pains narrating the ordeal people face on the Benin – Ore route. It is saddening, he said, that people leave Lagos early but “never get to the East until after 36 hours.” Nneji, who is also the secretary of the Association of Luxury Bus Owners of Nigeria, ALBON, had, in a communique jointly signed by him and Prince Ejike Okoli, called for an “urgent intervention programme on the Shagamu-Ore-Benin road to ensure that normal flow of traffic is restored.” He told Newswatch that, as a way of ameliorating the hardship faced by travellers, ALBON members often bought chippings and brick objects with which its members fill and make the bad portions of the road passable. The bad state of the road has had enormous adverse effect on the lifespan of their vehicles. In a bid to escape the ever present anguish on the road and avoid being trapped in traffic, some drivers often choose to navigate narrow roads through the bush. For some of them, these often came at a cost as there were reports of people falling victim to robbers. According to Ezekiel Uzodinma who works with a transport company in Lagos, robbers often took advantage of the bad road situation to wreck havoc. “Tell me which robber would stand on the road to stop a luxurious bus on high speed at midnight? The robbers benefit from the bad roads. If you watch carefully, you will find that they often operate at spots where the road is rough and does not allow for speed.” A trip from Lagos to Abuja, also comes with its own discomfort and hardship, especially within the Ekiti-Kogi axis of the route, owing to the poor state of the roads. Contract for the renovation of the Benin–Ore road was awarded to Reynolds Construction Company and Borini Prono last year and the road is currently undergoing construction but total relief is yet to come the way of drivers and commuters who ply the road as they still pass through stress in some parts of the highway. Another road that had caused a lot of trauma to motorists and drivers is the Enugu – Onitsha expressway. “The road is a nightmare,” said one Awka resident. “It has sent many people to their untimely grave.” Although contract for the rehabilitation of the road had been awarded to Niger Construction Limited and CCC, both construction companies, not much progress has been made, as passengers and drivers still have to endure the discomfort that travelling on the road entails, to say nothing of the damage to vehicles with its attendant high maintainance costs. There are yet other bad roads across the country which have been awarded for rehabilitation or construction but which haven’t translated into joy for road travellers yet. Some of them are the Enugu – Port Harcourt expressway awarded to CCC; the Calabar – Ugep – Ogoja – Katsina

Ala road (section I) by Brunelli Engineering; the Calabar – Ugep – Ogoja – Katsina Ala road (section 11) which contract was won by the CCECC and the 9th Mile – Otukpo – Makurdi Road being handled by Bulletine. Others include the Mararaba-Pambeguwa-Saminaka – Jos road, section I in Kaduna State that was awarded to Arab Contractors Ltd, the Mararaba Pambeguwa Saminaka – Jos road, section II being handled by PW Nigeria Ltd, the Gombe – Numan – Yola, section II by Triacta, the Maiduguri- Bama – Gwoza – Hong road, section II in Borno State being handled by CCC, the Kano – Katsina – Kaura Namoda – Jiba road, section II in Zamfara and Katsina states by Dantata and Sawoe and the contract for the rehabilitation of the Kano – Katsina-Kaura Namoda – Jiba Road, section IV in Zamfara State by Mothercat Ltd. The completion date for some of the roads is December 2011. There are yet some other roads that were awarded for rehabilitation and construction but are not being attended to. One of them is the Lagos – Ibadan expressway, which, in the opinion of a regular user of the road, is another “dangerous highway.” The road had since been awarded to Bi-Courtney but nothing significant has been seen beyond the billboards announcing the intention to do so. A journey on many of these roads leaves unpleasant memories. The sheer scale of the dilapidation says a lot about the neglect they had faced. But neglect, as it had come to be known, might have little to do with lack of funds but more with corruption, either through collaboration of contractors and government officials who choose to do shoddy jobs, for their own selfish gain, or embezzlement of funds meant for projects. Conservative estimates put the cost of funds voted for road repairs, rehabilitation or construction in the last few years at well over one trillion Naira, with nothing much to show for it. Perhaps, road infrastructure across the length and breath of Nigeria would not have gotten this bad, had Nigerians more viable alternative transport systems such as a rail system. The rail situation in Nigeria today is pathetic. It says a lot about the progress the country has made in the past 50 years, that Nigerian governments had not been able to develop the country’s rail system beyond what the British handed over to it. In an age when many countries of the world, including developed and developing nations have improved their rail transport system, with their citizens enjoying underground train service from one location to the other, Nigeria is still stuck with the old rails of yore. From Gombe to Jos, Makurdi to Enugu to Lagos, railway stations, many of which were built many decades ago, long before Nigeria gained independence, are now a shadow of themselves. Many of the coaches are grounded in some railway stations across the country with some of the rail lines rusty and parts of them stolen. The once popular means of transportation is today the least patronised. Although some railway stations still run skeletal services, it is doubtful if many Nigerians would agree to a free ride on the trains, as they are long moribund. Gabriel Osu, director of social communications, Catholic archdiocese of Lagos, said Nigerian railway stations and trains had become archaic. “I live close to the Railway area. It reminds one of Mungo Park. Go there and see the old sight,” Osu said. The Nigeria Railway Corporation, according to John Dottie, the Lagos District manager, came into being in 1898. But the hope of reviving the rail system is not lost, if recent efforts at revamping it is anything to go by. According to Dottie, the Jonathan administration has shown a strong determination to revamp the sector. The government, he said, had procured new locomotive engines and, at present,the last batch of 25 new locomotives ordered by it have arrived the country. Also, contract for the construction of a railway line from Itakpe through Ajaokuta- Warri, which was abandoned some years ago, has resumed, with Julius Berger PLC as the contractor handling the job. The government is also considering constructing an East-West railway line. Apart from procuring new locomotives, Dottie said government would also rehabilitate some old ones. He admitted that one major challenge the rail system had faced in the past decades, had been the lack of a sustained investment in the sector by successive administrations. He traced the era of decline of the railway system to the oil boom of 1975 which he said made the government to invest massively in road construction while neglecting the railway sector. Abdulrahman Abubakar, former managing director, Nigeria Railway Corporation, NRC, also told Newswatch that the sector had long been neglected as there was no concerted effort made by successive administrations to revamp the sector until the late Yar’Adua assumed power, and whose effort is now been improved upon by his successor, Jonathan. The former NRC boss believes that a rehabilitated railway system would help reduce the loss of human lives on the roads. “If the system is rehabilitated, we would have less carnage on our roads,” Abubakar said. Like the railway, the Nigeria Airways, now defunct, did not fare better as a parastatal of government. Having gained independence, many African countries saw the need to name their national airlines after their countries. It was a thing of pride. That was how the Nigeria Airways came into being. But today, the Nigeria Airways is no more, another victim of poor management and corruption. Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president who also served as military head of state, once said that, in 1979 when he handed over power to the Shehu Shagari led civilian administration, the Nigeria Airways had many planes in its fleet. But, by the time he, Obasanjo, returned in 1999 as civilian president, only one of the planes was in good condition. That says a lot about how the affairs of the government owned airline was managed over the years. As a way to reposition the airline, the Nigerian government, in 2004, entered into a deal with Virgin Atlantic, to take over the ailing company as core investor. Nigeria Airways thus became Virgin Nigeria, and operated as the country’s national carrier, a development that led one commentator to grumble about “shame and embarrassment” of having a foreign company act as “Nigeria’s national carrier.” But Virgin Atlantic later pulled out of the deal, citing breach of contract as reason. The company’s stake has since been acquired by Jimoh Ibrahim, a Nigerian business mogul and enterpreneur. In water transportation, Nigeria has not fared better. The plan to dredge the River Niger, which would have long provided alternative to air and road transportation, had been on the drawing board for more than 40 years without anything being done about it, until last year when Yar’Adua awarded the contract. As part of his efforts to boost water transportation, the Shagari government had built a port facility at Onitsha, to enable ships berth there. But the facility never served any purpose since the early 80s that it was commissioned. Water transportation will help reduce the pressure on roads since heavy goods often transported by trucks, could be channelled through the river to specific points across the country.The dredging, by the time it is completed, would make it possible for vessels of different sizes to ply

the river to different parts in the hinterland. One of the means of judging the quality of life of any progressive society is the amenities it offers, one of which is pipe borne water. But, 50 years after independence, pipe borne water is still scarce in many Nigerian homes, both in the rural and urban areas. The reason is obvious. Many water facilities have broken down while those still functioning are unable to meet the needs of the people. The result is that water supply is erratic in many areas and scarce in others. The state of public water supply is so bad that a city like Onitsha has not enjoyed potable water for over a decade now. The incidence of gully erosion and neglect culminated in rendering Nkisi Water Works, which supplies water to the town, unproductive. Obi Okoye, founding pastor, Liberty Sanctuary Christian Assembly, Onitsha, told Newswatch that the water situation in the city has gone so bad that “ children born in Onitsha since 1997 have not experienced what pipe borne water is all about.” The city, he said, depends on boreholes for its domestic and industrial water supply. Apart from Awka, no town or community in Anambra State is serviced with pipe borne water. For long in Benin and many parts of Edo State, water ceased flowing from public taps because all the water systems built in the early sixties and seventies had broken down due to their obsolete state. As a result, many residents of Benin have had to rely on boreholes over the years. But Adams Oshiomhole, the governor of Edo State, who assumed duty two years ago, has promised to fix the problem. The government is confronting the challenge through massive rehabilitation of water works and dams. The government has also taken delivery of two new borehole rigs that can strike water at more than 1,000 metres deep in any part of the state. “With the new borehole rigs, there’s no part of Edo State we will not be able to strike water,” assured Oshiomhole. In Aba, water supply is irregular. Charles Okoro, a resident of the town, told Newswatch that water supply is limited to Ogbor Hill, the neighbourhood location of the water works, where residents may be lucky to enjoy water supply for two days in a month. Apart from the Ogbor Hill area, another part of Aba that has access to pipe born water is the Railway area. This followed the recent activation of water supply by the Aba North local government area. Another area where Nigeria has failed to measure up since the last decades is in the power sector. Since the days of the National Electric Power Authority, NEPA, many Nigerians had lived with the notion that it is not possible to enjoy uninterrupted power supply in a day. A Nigerian who has lived in South Africa for four years, told Newswatch that, in the four years he had been in that country, he never experienced power outage. That may sound incredible to Nigerians. In Nigeria, 50 years after independence, many cities and towns across the country do not enjoy electricity for up to four hours a day. The country currently generates about 3,000 megawatts. This is inspite of the huge funds that had been committed into improving the power sector. Between 1999 to 2007, the Obasanjo government, according to a House of Representatives report of “investigation into the huge sums of money spent on power generation, transmission and distribution between June 1999 and May 2007,” spent more than 13 billion dollars with little or no meaningful improvement in power generation. This gross inefficiency and failure had, over the years, elevated Nigeria to a leading importer of electricity generating sets. According to the African Business magazine, Nigeria is reputed to have imported three times as many generators than other major importers like Sudan and Egypt. The magazine’s study focused on diesel generators between 2000kva and 5000kva capacity. Another report by the Central Bank of Nigeria estimates that both corporate bodies and individuals spent as much as N1.66 trillion per annum to meet their alternative energy requirements due to the gross inadequacy of the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (formerly NEPA). But the Jonathan administration has promised that it would not be long before Nigerians start enjoying stable power supply. His government recently announced that it would partner with the private sector to provide Nigerians stable electricity as obtains in South Africa and Ghana. Jonathan’s “road map” to delivering stable power supply has been hailed by some analysts as the most daring, if not promising attempt yet, at finding a lasting solution to the power crisis in the country. Part of the arrangement is to privatise eleven distribution companies and six generation companies, for better service delivery to Nigerians. Reported by Emmanuel Uffot, Dike Onwuamaeze, Annette Oghenerhaboke, Pita Ochai, Augustine Adah, Adanna Mmahi and Yejide Idowu - Olaleye