For the Sake of Federal Roads

Contributed by Mike Akpan
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By 2012, toll gates, which were dismantled in 2003 by the administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, will be back on all federal roads across the country. Mike Onolomemen, minister of works, revealed this plan at an interactive session with members of the Senate Committee on Works in Abuja early this month. According to him, the decision is part of the federal government’s strategy to reverse the deplorable state of its roads in the country. “The future of the road sector cannot be shouldered by the federal government alone. We will soon start work on some of these roads. By 2012, we will introduce toll gate policy to rehabilitate our roads. Beyond this, we need a major reform of the sector,”Onolomemen explained. Even before the minister’s disclosure, Gabriel Amuchi, managing director, Federal Roads Maintenance Agency, FERMA, had already intimated journalists in Abuja, some days earlier, that the federal government was reconsidering the decision to bring back toll gates on federal highways to enable it to raise sufficient funds for their rehabilitation and maintenance. He defended the proposal in this way: “It may interest you to know that only 40 percent of our total budget are normally released to us and you know what that means. To correct this anomaly, we are considering re-introducing the toll gates at all federal highways so that vehicles will pay some tolls which will help us to raise more funds for road repairs and routine maintenance.” Abdulkadir Kure, chairman of FERMA, also spoke along this line in Lagos recently when he said: “ FERMA requires about N1 trillion annually to fix the nation’s deplorable roads, but what it had received in the past two years is a paltry N30 billion through budgetary allocation for road maintenance.” Kure said the decision to bring back toll collection on federal roads had already received the blessing of the stakeholders. But it is most unlikely that the total collections from the toll gates annually will be anything near the N1 trillion which FERMA requires every year to maintain the nation’s 220,000 kilometres of federal roads in the country. In the light of this, Kure said: “ the federal government is also planning to introduce a five- percent road user charge on the pump price of petrol and diesel through which it hopes to raise about N30 billion annually to maintain the nation’s 220,000 kilometres of roads… Out of the N30 billion expected to be generated from fuel tax, only 40 percent will be utilised by FERMA for federal roads while the remaining 60 percent will be shared by established state road maintenance agencies.” Kure is not unmindful of a possible adverse reaction of the people to the proposed fuel tax policy. So he tried to justify it. “With about N35 million needed to effectively restore one kilometre of road, FERMA will require 35 years to maintain the roads under the current level of funding.” The introduction of fuel tax and the withdrawal of fuel subsidy in 2012 will not be an easy task for President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and his government. He must realise that all over the world, people resist tax imposition, especially when such taxes are considered to be either anti-people, ill-timed or unjustifiable. In Nigeria, no government has had it easy whenever it tries to increase the prices of petroleum products by whatever name. Even though former President Obasanjo succeeded in increasing the prices of petroleum products more than 11 times during his eight-year rule, it was not always easy for him. At a stage, he even burnt his finger when he tried to use the courts to legitimise the petroleum tax which he arbitrarily imposed on the country with effect from January 1, 2004 without the approval of the National Assembly. The former president had sought to use the court to arm-twist organised labour groups to accept the illegal tax as a fait accompli and drop their planned industrial action on the issue. In the process, he got what he never bargained for. In a twist of fate, the Court of Appeal declared the petroleum tax as illegal and ordered that it be suspended. Surprisingly, the federal government quickly accepted the Court of Appeal ruling and accordingly, abandoned the fuel tax policy. So, President Jonathan must be circumspect in accepting whatever recommendations are pushed to him by officials in the ministries and federal agencies on taxation so that he does not bite more than he can chew. Even the toll gates which the government plans to re-introduce next year were dismantled by Obasanjo to pave way for the introduction of fuel tax because they no longer justified their continued existence. As a result of mismanagement and deep-seated corruption, annual collections from all the toll gates nationwide totalled only N756 million. That amount was not even enough to maintain one stretch of a federal highway in one year. For now, there is no guarantee that this time around, the toll gates will be properly managed. Even if everything goes well with all the proposed sources of revenue, Nigerians are warned not to expect an immediate improvement in the state of federal roads. According to Olubunmi Peters, former managing director of FERMA, “Nigerians should expect only 60 percent improvement in the quality of federal roads in the country by 2020” The implication of Peter’s statement is that the federal government is taking much more loads than it can carry in terms of road development and maintenance. If by 2020, only 60 percent of the federal roads will experience improvement, then there is an urgent need for a paradigm shift in our national policy on road development and maintenance to fast-track development in the country. In the light of this reality, I suggest that if we need quicker development in the country, most of the federal roads should be transferred to the states for immediate rehabilitation and proper maintenance since the federal government’s mechanism for this purpose is evidently very weak. Governor Godswill Obot Akpabio has already proved this point in Akwa Ibom State by his excellent handling of the rehabilitation of some federal roads in the state. Both Onolomemen, current minister of works, and his predecessor, Mohammed Daggash, had attested to the high quality of the federal roads rehabilitated. The high standard exhibited in Akwa Ibom State, is an evidence that the states can be equal to the task if they are properly funded and saddled with the responsibility. SMS: 08023880068