How long can Nigeria resist the IMF?

Second in a series on the International Monetary Fund's attempt to destroy the most populous nation in Africa.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its efforts to strangle the Nigerian economy are topics of daily discussion in Nigeria. In restaurants and other gathering places of regular Nigerian citizens, the refusal of the Nigerian government to acquiesce to the murderous demands of the Fund, is constantly being discussed.

The IMF is demanding that the government implement drastic austerity measures, including a 60% devaluation of the Nigerian currency, the naira, as well as a dramatic increase in domestic fuel prices.

While Nigeria does not have large debts for its (approximately 100 million) population, the debts are bunched and the country is caught in a short-term payments crisis. Nigeria has enough foreign exchange for about two months' worth of imports.

The pressure on the government is intense. It has had to implement several other of the IMF's demands simply because it had no choice. This IMF-imposed austerity is the greatest cause of disruption in Nigeria, but so far the government has held out against the most damaging of the IMF demands. A cartoon in a recent Nigerian newspaper is exemplary of Nigerian views of the IMF. It shows the head of Finance Minister Soleye with the body of a fish, while the IMF dangles the bait of an IMF loan in front of him.

The misery and deterioration in the living standards in Nigeria has caused rage against the government.

The February-March strike by doctors is exemplary. Reportedly dissatisfaction among the medical profession over lack of medicine and medical supplies led to the strike. The government ultimately responded by banning the Nigerian Medical Association and the Association of Resident Doctors.

Student leaders and student organizations were also clamped down on when they decided to boycott classes in support of the doctors. The government has accused some of the doctors and students with carrying out "subversive activities," seizing the opportunity of the crisis to cause chaos.

The unconditional surrender of the doctors to the government does not guarantee that other unions and organizations will not rebel against the IMF's austerity. High numbers of government workers, including teachers, have been laid off from their jobs. In just one example of the potential problem, police in Minna, Niger State, have warned laid off workers to desist from any act of sabotage. The police had gotten reports that laid-off workers were planning to burn government property.

The government has also ordered Nigerian unions not to affiliate with international labor unions, fearing outside manipulation of worker resentment of IMF austerity.

The flare-up of rioting again by the Maitatsine fundamentalist Islamic cult, this time in Gombe, earlier this year, resulting in a large number of people killed, and immense property damage, is seen as another signal to the Nigerian government to toe the line with the IMF. Though they may not have any direct evidence, Nigerians suspect, according to my Nigerian sources, that Qaddafi has something to do with this cult, which has repeatedly in the past years destroyed parts of cities in northern Nigeria.

In commissioning an investigation of the riot, Brig. Sani Sami, the military governor of Bauchi state, charged that the riots were masterminded by "forces of reaction and anarchy in highly placed positons." Alluding to another hand behind the cultists, he said it was disturbing that "hundreds of strong and able-bodied adults without visible means of income could be housed, fed and financed to terrorize the lives of people under the guise of religion."

Other moves by the government to prevent austerity-provoked unrest have included: clamping down on the press, continued closure of its border and expelling of foreigners in an attempt to control smuggling and illegal currency operations.

For economic survival, the government has also begun conducting barter deals (oil-for-imported supplies and equipment). A $500 million barter deal with Brazil has reportedly been expanded to nearly $1 billion, and a similar deal for $400 million has been made with Fiat and ENI in Italy.

Nigerians understand the pressure being put on the country in political terms. A recent article in the daily *New Nigerian* attributes the pressure of the pro-IMF British and American governments on Nigeria to Anglo-American unhappiness with "our determined efforts to build our economy independent of them. They are upset whenever any government comes to power not on their terms." The paper calls for Nigeria to leave the British Commonwealth, and re-examine trade relations with "deadly friends," a reference to the pro-IMF United States.