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**TOPIC: THE RISING CONCERN Of OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN AND ALMAJIRIS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA.**

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I live in Abuja which is actually located in the north central part of Nigeria. The main problem with my environment is the increase of out of school children and almajiris. First I’ll give a brief introduction on the term Almajiri. The term “Almajiri” is a Hausa word for pupil or student and emanates from the Arabic word ‘AlMuhajir’ which means a seeker of Islamic knowledge. Its origin can be traced from the migration of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina. Those who migrated with the prophet to Medina were called ‘Al-Muhajirrun’, meaning migrants. In Nigeria, the word “Almajiri” means those who left their villages or town, parents, relations, and friends in search of Islamic religious knowledge and scholarship.

The Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria started around the 11th century in Kanem-Borno and was later replicated in the Sokoto Caliphate after the triumph of the Jihad led by Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio. Both empires not only promoted the scheme but also supported it with public finances. Asides the authorities’ recognition and promotion, the scheme also enjoyed the support of other major stakeholders, such as the community, the parents and the pupils themselves. Later on, the products of the system, were to form the group of elites that controlled various government organs and parastatals in the pre and post-colonial Northern Nigeria.

It’s really sad I must say to see poor children on the streets every day. Generations upon generations, there is no end to the sight of young children of school age roaming the streets in a quest for survival. As an age-old tradition, these kids are popularly called ‘Almajiri’ – children from poor homes usually sent to Islamic boarding schools. Formal education remains a far cry for thousands of these children. Unfortunately this children were born into this fate and it was caused by the amount of young girls married of to have children early. This girls probably died of VVF leaving the children uncared for because the fathers are way older and won’t even care for the children. Some the fathers married a lot of women and had a lot of children but doesn’t have enough financial support to provide for the family. This leads to the parents pushing most of the kids out to Mallams to look for shelter, also to learn any skill under their wing. Now these Mallams push them out on the street to beg.

Put into perspective, Nigeria has about 13.2 million out of school children. In West Africa, Nigeria accounts for 45 per cent of out-of-school children. 69 per cent of the out-of-school in Nigeria are from Northern Nigeria, with 60 per cent of them comprising of girls. The number of out-of-school children in Nigeria has increased from 10.5 million in 2010 to 13.2 million in 2015. Some of the contributive factors to this issue is the protracted violent conflict in Northeast Nigeria. The destruction of schools by insurgents, forced displacement, and the volatile nature of the region has grossly impacted accessibility to primary education in the area.

Over the years, the Almajiri programme has co-existed alongside the formal school system; it has failed to be subsumed into the formal education sector. For instance, Nigeria’s former president, Goodluck Jonathan, reportedly spent about N15 billion in building Almajiri schools in an effort to integrate basic education into the almajiri system. There have been reports that are the structures built for the purpose have either been used for conventional education or lay waste because its pupils have gone back to the old ways of street begging.

Conflict experts hold that having vulnerable children in cities across a nation that is fighting an ideological war is a terrible risk. For instance, it has been widely reiterated that the reason Boko Haram insurgents has continued to wage war against the Nigerian state is as a result of a robust recruitment source. The almajiri system has created a mass of vulnerable younglings who are susceptible to the antics of conflict promoters upon the promise of material reward or psycho-social brainwashing.

Examples of brainwashing like initiation into homosexuality. Some of these Mallams use this almajiris as an experiment to find out their sexuality. They keep these boys under and since they can’t talk make them do horrible things. These boys get abused all the time, are used for child labour, child trafficking, some are even used as a means of organ trade. They sell their kidneys and other body parts and make money from it. Then some are used to rob from people. Most of them contract all sorts of diseases like AIDS, HIV and hepatitis. These almajiris are a serious health risk to the society because they carry all sorts of diseases, most are airborne and can easily be spread to innocent ordinary citizens of the countrty.

The deportation of the almajiri children in the middle of the Coronavirus pandemic has cast more light in the dark. For the many years the almajiri system has existed, it has been perceived by many as constituting public nuisance. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, where free movements have been banned and social distancing greatly promoted, the almajiri way of life is greatly threatened. Hundreds of almajiri children have been deported from across different states of the federation; in a bid to flatten the spread of the Coronavirus. In some cases, some of them have tested positive to COVID-19. Nigeria’s House of Representatives has also called on the Federal government to stop state governments from repatriating almajiri children.

Beyond COVID-19, the almajiri system requires collective action. This should involve both the federal and state governments to map out a holistic policy action to address the issues around almajiri system. Also, traditional and religious institutions have a vital role to play, considering that the practice is deeply rooted in cultural and religious sentiments. Governmental actions can only provide the capacity for reforms; it will require the collaborations of relevant stakeholders, including the Northern elites, for meaningful impact to be achieved and sustainability guaranteed. Without a comprehensive policy initiative, the almajiri children remain the evidence of dearth of social security for citizens of the country.

In conclusion, the discourse has succeeded in analyzing the linkage between the Almajiri system and how the Almajiri are used as instruments of violent extremism during ethno-religious and political conflicts by terror groups, which, in return, portrays them as prospective terrorists in the country. To ensure the success of the Almajiri school programme, the following are recommended:

1. Funding should be adequate, regular and monitored. The school curriculum should be planned to include technical; and vocational courses. Its long objectives should be for self-sufficiency and self-employment. Adult and technical education should be put in place to cater for older ones.

2. Special training should be organized for the Almajiri mallams (teachers), to give them a sense of belonging, direction and to absorb them into the formal school system. Opportunities for those among them who may want to further their studies at the tertiary level should be made available.