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BY EDITOR ON MAY 21, 2018

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I was never a lawyer to Boko Haram,I only sought justice for orphans—Barr. Mustapha Zanna

In this interview, Barrister Abubakar Mustapha Zanna spoke to Northeast Star magazine in the newly built Future Prowess Islamic School premises in Maiduguri. He spoke on his humanitarian work in Maiduguri, the Future

Prowess Islamic School, the Boko Haram insurgency and other related issues. Excerpts.

ABUBAKAR M.S, ASTA MALA, IBRAHIM M.A (Maiduguri)

1. Sir, can you start by introducing yourself to us?

My name is Abubakar Mustapha Zanna. I was born and brought up here in Maiduguri and went to school here in Maiduguri. After I graduated from the University of Maiduguri some 30 years ago and practiced as a lawyer for twenty years, I found myself here as a humanitarian. I reasoned that I should look for an avenue where I can also train other people as someone who has not paid a kobo to get educated, in fact my last registration fee in the university was 40 Naira, so that tells me that it is the government that trained me to be a lawyer. I must give gratitude to the government for training me well to this level. So I said it's time for me to serve as a model to many of us that the government trained to give back to the society. I came to the conclusion that the government alone cannot solve our problems. So I came up with the idea of setting up a foundation and as somebody who is a Muslim who knows that there is a mighty reward reserved for anyone who caters for orphans and vulnerable children, I decided to set up a school for them.

2. Can you explain the whole idea behind the school?

The whole idea was what brought up the Future Prowess Islamic School. I set up this to give supportive services to orphans and vulnerable children and by doing that I felt I can start with 36 orphans; this was in 2007. When the insurgency started in 2009, most of the senior members of Boko Haram got killed leaving behind their wives and children. We have no option but to admit 250 orphans to provide free education for them. I need to make it clear here that I don't admit only the Boko Haram children but also that of the security agencies too because many security personnel also got killed leaving behind wives and children. When doing this thing I also felt I cannot live the orphans like this without enrolling my own children into the school so that was what I did, I put my children in the school and they attended together with the orphans; I did not live the teachers and directors out of this, all of them brought their children in the school, so doing that gave the orphans the feeling that we are a family.

3. What about the surviving mothers' of these children? Where are they? Who is taking of them?

The mothers were also not left out on their own; we brought the widows on board. We gave them a life line; we brought the children and widows together and ask them what they want us to do for the children because we want to find future for these children. We asked them what type of education they want their children to have which eventually made us to run the school together with western education. We introduce English and French, French because we are neighboring three countries and all the countries are francophone nations and it only take an hour to reach any of these nations. We also employed some of these widows to be the ones to cook for these children, some of them serve the children, while some of them are support staff to the school, they are the ones to check and see whether the curriculum set up has been given to the children. We also have a skill acquisition center where we provide entrepreneurship training for the mothers of the students and young girls.

4. What motivated you to start this foundation?

Well I just have to offer help and sustenance to orphans and vulnerable children because it is right. And if there is any motivating factor it is seeing that I give the orphans hope and a future. It gives me a sense of purpose, that I am adding value to the society.

5. We have the highest number of out of school children in the country according to statistics available to us and at the same time we have high birth rate couple with high maternal mortality rates. What is your take on the high birth rate that we have in the north east?

May be you don't even know that we have more than thirty thousand children in this state who don't even know their second name talk less of knowing their religion or their tribe, that is just the truth. Look at the issue of girl child education. A girl of 13 years, ordinarily she is not suppose to be a wife, but now a mother and a widow, so what are you going to call this? A woman, or a child, mother or a widow? And secondly let's take the male child education, when the insurgency cropped up in 2009 the children that were 6 to 7 which were suppose to be at primary school at that time were delayed to go to school,

because primary schools were closed down. These children are now 16, 17, 18, so are you going to put these children in primary school or secondary school, the answer is no, so what are you going to do with them? And this are the army of children that are fighting in the hinter land, who are the Boko Haram terrorists and those that are here don't have a lively hood, they are not trained in knowing morality, either Islamic or that of western education, so what do you have to call this situation. The magnitude of the challenge is so diverse that the only alternative we have is that we should give it a communal approach. No government can control this thing; the concerted effort has to be from us. There has to be a communal effort. All these approaches that we are trying to make or the international development partners coming in cannot help us because this is our own problem. They don't have the full idea how it was started so they can't be part of the solution. We just had the Lake Chad basin governors' forum and that is the only avenue I see some hope in the long run. We are going to take the lead by ourselves and solve the problem.

Let me just tell you what happen in Rwanda and South Africa; Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in Robin Island but when he was released, he said that he has forgiven and forgotten, then all others follow, and they got long lasting peace through that. So to overcome it we must try the bottom-top approach in problem solving.

6.Are you suggesting amnesty for the terrorists?

No, amnesty cannot work but transitional justice; we have communal ways of solving problems so why not apply it. In the communal ways you know you cannot start from the top, you have to use bottom top approach to the issue, we are all from the same land so we should try and show them that this is our problem, we are all born and brought up here. We are all from the same community; we have to come and stay together to solve the problem. Permit me to also add that fighting terrorism is not an easy thing. For example, Israel is a super power when it comes to military might but Israel has fighting terrorism since the 60s. Till today Israel still faces attacks every now and then. How much more a developing country likes Nigeria. I should like to say that the Army deserves commendation. There is no single town or village that has been captured by the terrorists since this administration came into power. So we just have to use the medium at our disposal and that it is the carrot and stick approach. We have used too much of the stick so it is time to make more use of the carrot.

7.Are you trying to say that most of the Boko Haram fighters are Kanuris?

No matter how one may wish to say it, you know how it started, there is no way I can see somebody like Mohammed Yusuf or Shekau and say they are not from here. This man has been on television, so why will somebody try to hide things, we can't change the narratives.

8. You emerge the first runner up for the 2016 Robert Burns humanitarian award but David Nott eventually got the award. Were you discouraged or challenged?

This is not the first or second time of me being nominated for an Award. I got my first award in 2010. I also won the *Unsung Hero* for Daily Trust newspaper, and my *alma mata*, the University of Maiduguri gave me Distinguished personality award, and for the one in Scotland which is Robert Burns, to be recognized in a land that is not yours and to be taken to that level and say you are one of the worthy humanitarians in this world, for me I think is a great achievement. You know it is not only Robert Burns but the type of recognition that I have gotten is much more than that. The children I trained here call me father, and up till today I don't even know who nominated me in this sought of things.

9. Are you in support of ransom payment to Boko Haram terrorists?

Let's us be frank, what brought about all these mediation and negotiation is that President Muhammadu Buhari decided to be strong to go to the United Nations and say I want to negotiate with Boko Haram, and that was when the United Nations told him to go ahead. Let us not forget that it was not in his character to negotiate with them. Muhammadu Buhari always been saying that, "I will crush them," so I think when he came in to office as the president, he saw that the narratives has to change and that made him to get the Chibok girls back through negotiation. For me, whether ransom was paid

or not paid is not the issue but getting the girls back. We just had to find ways of getting the Chibok girls released.

10. Scholars and analysts have made this assertion that military might alone cannot bring terrorism to an end; that there is the need for persuasion? What is your take on this?

We have to use the medium at our own disposal and am very happy to tell you that we are now getting it right because of the Lake Chad Basin conference which is the bottom-top approach, and you know in every country they have their own different perspectives on insurgency but by coming together, Chad, Cameroon and Niger to collaborate, the menace of Boko Haram will be overcome *insha Allah*. There is no way we can solve this without the Chadians, Cameroonians and Nigeriens coming together and giving their own perspectives of how they see Boko Haram. We have to be serious on reconstruction, mediation, peace building and rehabilitation and we have to start from the local level where we can carry everybody along.

11. You once represent the family of late Muhammed Yusuf in a court of law?

For the past eleven years, from 2007 I stopped legal practice so that I can concentrate on the NGO, so for anybody to say that I have represented the family it's a lie, but what I did which made people to say that I have represented the family of Muhammad Yusuf was that I represented the orphans, the children of the slain Boko Haram fighters because some people tried to claim their real estates, their inheritance. You know when we admitted these children in 2009 when their fathers were killed as Boko Haram, the military demolished their houses. Things got out of hand when some people started thinking that the land of the deceased belonged to one and they can lay claims on it. So I went on enforcement for the right of the children who are my students because they ought to inherit their fathers' properties. I went to represent them in the court because the land is their own and they have the right to inherit the land of their fathers be they Boko Haram members or whatever. Because of that some people interpreted it as representing Boko Haram members in the courts. By representing the children you are now representing Boko Haram members. I only provided free legal services for my students because some people wanted to defraud them.

12. Of recent we heard that Boko Haram no longer trust the federal government. What is your take on this?

Ok let me tell you, when you are fighting with somebody how do you trust one another? It is only through building confidence and the federal government is doing that very well. The truth is that if they can talk to Boko Haram for them to release those in captivity and Boko Haram will do that, it means there is some level of trust and confidence. If Boko Haram has no confidence in the Nigerian government, they will not honor its agreement with the Nigerian government on the Dapchi girls release and others. That is no better way of building confidence than to give your words and stand by it which can only be done through integrity and that was what the federal government did. So I don't want to join issues with anyone saying that Boko Haram members no longer trust the government. What I can say that they building that confidence and this will take some time. And we must appreciate the fact that we have total peace in the area of humanitarian services for some time, the attacks on civilians have drastically reduced, and so many other aspects.

13. What do you think are the root causes of terrorism in Nigeria?

Well terrorism is so diverse and complex. I think ignorance, lack of education in the northeast especially northern Borno; abject poverty and religious misinterpretation are the root causes.

13. Do you think stakeholders have the will to implement the decision reached at the just concluded Lake Chad Basin Governors' forum conference?

Well since the first step has been taken, I pray that they will implement it and whosoever initiated this programme knows that this is a noble way to get peace. I am a pragmatist so I will give them the benefit of the doubt that it will succeed.

14. What do you think the government is not doing to bring an end to Boko Haram menace?

Let me tell you this, the magnitude of what happen has never happened in anywhere before? Now how do we imagine that NEMA or SEMA can handle millions of displaced people when our officials have no prior experience on crisis management? No one has been trained in this part, so how do you think we are going to manage all this. I think the stakeholders are trying their best and the general condition of the IDPs and other vulnerable people is gradually improving. The government is trying but it needs to do more in the areas of education, job creation, peace building and mediation.

14. Do you think killing these boys who fight for Boko Haram while ignoring their sponsors is the best way to go about it?

If you look at Boko Haram insurgency closely, you will discover that it is conscience driven. It is not financially driven; what is driving them is the ideology or the opinion of what Boko Haram says. So for me I don't think there is any financial sponsor of Boko Haram except their members.

15. Have you been receiving any support from the federal or state government?

The federal government through the Presidential Initiative on Northeast had built six class rooms, two boreholes and toilets for the school; not only that but they also furnished them for us. I am very grateful to the federal government for doing that. And let me tell you that if there is anybody who has helped me in setting up this foundation it is Kashim Shettima not as a governor but as an individual. In fact, the first three months salary of this foundation was paid by Kashim Shettima; he was even a Director at the start, but he left after he became a governor. He is a very charitable person.

16. Do you see a possible end to Boko Haram in the nearest future?

Yes I see a possible end in no distant time especially with this Lake Chad Basin Governors' forum conference.

17. What do you want to be remembered for?

I want to be remembered as someone who gave back to the society; someone who stood up for the vulnerable and the deprived.

18. Being an Islamic school, is it only Muslim children that attend the school?

No we have non Muslims, and I have brought NYSC members who are Christians to teach them. I have given them place to stay and ensure their security also. So when you want to do something you don't look at religion, background or ethnicity.

19. On a final note, do you have any political ambition?

No I don't have. I think I have gone beyond that. Let me tell you a lot of people don't know that I was the National Legal Adviser of the Social Democratic Party when the late MKO Abiola contested for the presidency in 1993. I have played politics before. But I don't think I have any passion for that now. Still I will prefer not to talk about this any further.