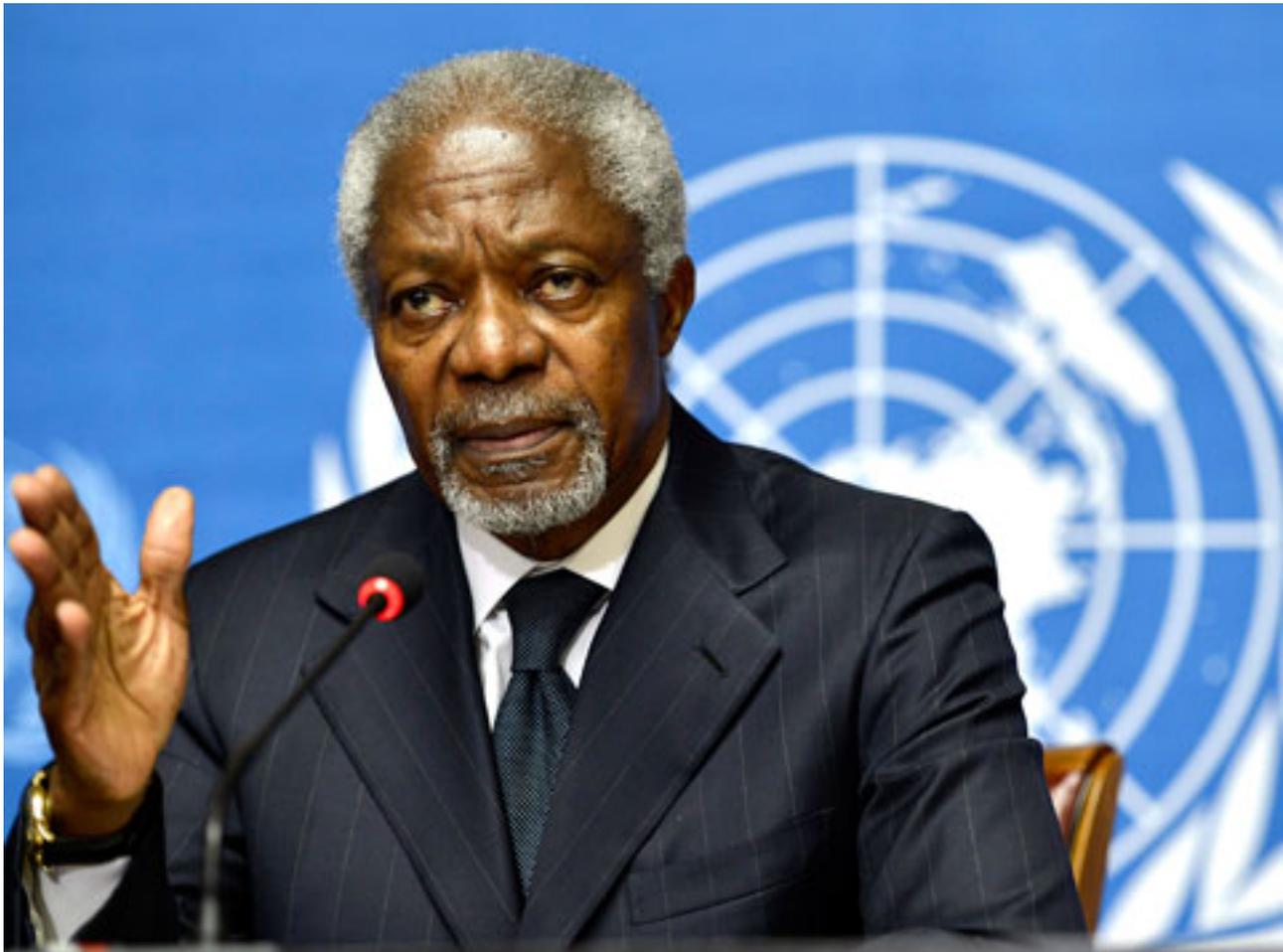


Written by Naija Pundit  
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In a remarkable testimony in his new book 'Interventions (A Life in War and Peace)' the former United Nation's Secretary General and most recently U.N. Peace Representative to the Syrian Conflict, Mr. Kofi Annan, has revealed the minute details of his meeting with acclaimed winner of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections, Bashonrun MKO Abiola, and how chief Abiola assured him that he would not be seeking to reclaim his mandate.

NaijaPundit brings you excerpts from the book below:

On the Abiola saga, Annan wrote: “Moshood Abiola had been imprisoned and in solitary confinement since 1994. Previously he had been a millionaire businessman reveling in the most extravagant of lifestyles, acquired through a long-standing and close relationship with Nigeria’s military governments.

“But in 1993, there was a short-lived attempt to introduce democracy, and Abiola entered the presidential race. When Abiola looked entirely set to win, the final and full count was never allowed by the reigning military government of President Ibrahim Babangida, even though he had set up the elections in the first place. “Abiola backed down quietly, but the vote changed his relationship with the government. He had acquired an unprecedented swell of support from many sides of the ethnic and religious divides that criss-crossed Africa’s most populous country.

“When President Babangida was ousted from power and replaced by General Sani Abacha later that year, in the midst of Nigeria’s deepening financial crisis, the new president dissolved the institutions that had been formed to move the country toward a semblance of democracy—the parliament, the thirty state governments, and every single local council—and declared all political parties illegal.

“But in the unfolding chaos of Abacha’s rule, Abiola stepped forward in 1994 and, on the basis of the thwarted 1993 elections, announced to a huge crowd of supporters in Lagos that he was the legitimate president of Nigeria.

“He was immediately arrested and charged with treason and spent the next four years in solitary confinement. During this time, he was denied access to even radio, saw no one from his family from 1995 onward, was unable to talk to anyone else, and was shown only one newspaper article: a report on the assassination of one of his wives in 1996. The only other reading materials he had were a Bible and a Koran.

“Abacha was as illegitimate a ruler as one might have the misfortune to come across—extremely corrupt, and prone to eccentric and self-indulgent behaviour on a scale that only Nigeria’s crony-capitalist oil wealth could sustain.

“He loosely promised the return to democratic elections, including one to me personally after I became secretary-general in 1997, but persistently reneged on such pledges. Opponents and suspected opponents were arrested, and the ranks of political prisoners swelled, as did the number of victims of politically motivated murders at the hands of security forces.

“But on June 8, 1998, Abacha unexpectedly died. General Abdulsalami Abubakar was installed as his replacement the next day. I had met Abubakar previously, when he was accompanying Abacha at a summit in Lome, Togo, in January 1997. He had once served as a UN peacekeeping officer as part of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, so we had a common past in peacekeeping which I used to get us talking. “I found him reasonable in outlook and straight speaking, in contrast to the strange, quiet character of Abacha. At one point, when the president left the room, I pressed upon Abubakar the importance of releasing political prisoners. Abacha had only sighed away my repeated calls for greater freedoms and introduction of democracy, and I hoped influencing his advisers might at least increase the pressure upon the Nigerian president.

“But now Abubakar was president, and he, as he later revealed to me, was scared. The country was entirely isolated internationally after repeatedly refusing to change its political course or

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release political prisoners, and could count on little outside help; it was in a terrible financial position with a crippling high debt; Abacha had antagonised the country's power bases, which had brought growing unrest and violence onto the streets; the military (dominated by the Hausa ethnic group) was used to its privileged position in society and was not going to give this up easily; and while Abubakar recognised the necessity of democracy to ensure the country's political sustainability, a mismanaged and sudden introduction of elections could bring even more instability.

“Abacha had disingenuously set the date of October 1, 1998, for a transition to democracy, which, everyone agreed, he fully intended to miss. But Abubakar, with his more genuine agenda, was now beholden to this deadline. One way or another, he needed a carefully managed way out of this very difficult situation.

“Part of the problem for Abubakar was how to deal with the imprisoned Abiola. If released, he could still upend the political balance in the country if he demanded the presidency as he had before. Such a move would be backed by his mainstay of supporters in the South-west of the country, but almost certainly rejected by the military...A few weeks after Abubakar came to power—on June 22, 1998, at 3.30 pm—I had one of these sessions with Nigeria's foreign minister, Tom Ikimi.

“He conveyed Abubakar's message: The president hoped I could help him exploit the current opportunity provided by Abacha's death, Ikimi said, to assist his plan to move Nigeria out of its current predicament. He wanted to return Nigerian to a position of reasonable standing in the region and internationally, to end the country's misrule, and to usher in democracy. But he also wanted to extend the timetable for elections to ease the process of change—and he wanted my public support for this.

“Ikimi’s style was unrecognisable in comparison to the one he had displayed while serving Abacha. Previously, he had lectured me and others, at length, on how the internal affairs of Nigeria were solely the government’s business. That bold front was now giving way to realism: a recognition of the truly interdependent world of which Nigeria was a part.

“My first thought concerned Abiola. He could not be a casualty of this transition, or it would not be a transition at all. He had but won the first real attempt at democratic elections, retained significant support, and his imprisonment had caused him to become a symbol for those demanding political change in the country. Continuing to imprison him would mean the antithesis of any progress toward genuine democracy and the rule of law.

“‘I’m willing to publicly give my approval for the president’s plan,’ I said, as Ikimi’s eyes visibly lit up. ‘But only if Abiola is released.’ Ikimi looked taken aback. But he replied that if I came to Abuja personally to voice my support of Abubakar’s election proposals, then Abiola could be released. I accepted the invitation to visit.

“I would play whatever small role I could to aid the end of a military dictatorship; particularly in Nigeria, which had suffered enough from military rule, after an exhausting series of coups that had ridden roughshod over the country since 1960.

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“Due to my flight schedule, we flew on June 29 to Abuja from Vienna on a plane provided by the Nigerian government. They were keen for us to come, as it was a brand-new and lavishly furnished aircraft, designed for the president’s use. On arrival, I met with President Abubakar to discuss the situation. He emphasised everything Ikimi had said in New York, and I pushed him to move on his promises, to open up the political system and to bring in civil society, to build the momentum in his favour in order to keep the country on course.

“He replied positively but said the October 1 date for a transition to democracy was too soon for credible elections. I counseled him that if he postponed the date, he would have to publicly provide a new and detailed timetable and communicate clearly to everyone why this delay was necessary. I also reminded him that Abiola needed to be released if he was to obtain international goodwill—and mine.

“On this Abubakar wavered slightly. He pledged his willingness to release Abiola immediately, but under the condition that he made no attempt to reclaim the presidency. I could see the general’s concerns: if Abiola came out and demanded to be instated as president, it could cause a deep and violent split that, given the fragile conditions, could take the country to goodness knows where. Abiola’s release was necessary, but it also needed to be a calm process.

“I asked if I could see Abiola, to discuss this problem, and Abubakar said it would be arranged. It was later that night that Lamin heard the knock on his door, and we found ourselves speeding along Abuja’s dark roads to Abiola’s current holding place. We pulled up at a location near the presidential palace, and sullen guards walked us inside the guest house-like building into a simple, bare room with white walls, where I found him sitting quietly.

“After exchanging greetings, I explained that I was in discussions with the president and the junta concerning current developments in Nigeria, and I was pressing them for his release. He seemed remarkably ambivalent. I asked if he wanted to claim the presidency once he was out, which I told him I was confident would happen very soon.

“He said he was not sure, commenting that the junta would be afraid if he did. He seemed to be hedging his bets, not wanting to be drawn into a firm answer. Suddenly, he switched his interest and asked, ‘But who are you?’

“‘I’m Kofi Annan,’ I replied. ‘I’m the secretary-general of the United Nations.’ “‘What happened to the other one? The Egyptian?’ He said, surprised. I had mistakenly assumed that Abiola had been told who was coming to see him and why. All he had been told was that an ‘important person’ would visit. It was amazing the isolation in which this man had been kept—the regime was so used to keeping him in the dark, they maintained his ignorance of anything going on outside even now.

“Once he realised who I was, he became more enthusiastic. He also became more explicit regarding his plans. He said he had no intention of claiming the presidency. All he wanted was go to Mecca to pray and give thanks. But he emphasised that he would make no commitment in writing. If he did so, he felt this would destroy his reputation. But he said he was willing to give the same assurance to President Abubakar.

“I conveyed this assurance to Abubakar the next day, but he was still hesitant. I explained that a free Abiola, who had no interest in upsetting the situation, would be a calming influence on his supporters, not an agitating one. I then told him that I would be announcing in my departing speech to the press that the president had promised me he would release Abiola and the other prisoners very soon. Whether this speech reinforced his credibility or undermined it would now depend upon him.

“In the ensuing press conference, given shortly before our flight out of the country, I did as promised. But I also revealed that Abiola had, indeed, told me that he had no intention of claiming any right to the presidency, further removing any justification Abubakar held for not releasing him and also smoothing the path ahead with Abiola’s more hardline supporters. I was also trying to ease the concerns of those Nigerians who feared Abiola’s return.

“On our return journey, everything seemed set for Abiola’s release. But tragedy struck a week later when Abiola collapsed and died during a meeting with U.S. Under-Secretary of State Thomas Pickering. Despite the earnest intentions we had detected in Abubakar, the timing could only be considered suspicious.

“However, an international team of pathologists established that it was the result of heart condition, and there was no foul play—other than the fact, I thought that Abiola had been denied adequate medical care throughout his incarceration. Either way, he was yet another casualty of the systematic violations of a whole range of human rights that are inevitable under personalised and oppressive regimes.

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“On leaving the country after the final press conference, we found the Nigerians had lent us a very different airplane than the one in which we arrived. It was old, run-down, and did not look entirely safe. On seeing it, Kieran Prendergast, my insightful and witty under-secretary-general for political affairs, turned to me, laughing through his beard: ‘Well, you’ve done what they needed you for. Who cares about you now?’ Indeed, within fifteen minutes of taking off, the flaps jammed in a mechanical failure, and the pilot told us that we had to return and change aircraft...”