

the talk

o from lagos to saigon o in any event o an open house



From Lagos to Saigon

Nigerians are having a hard time in Vietnam.

THE REASONS WHY CITIZENS OF Nigeria come to Vietnam are mixed. The first wave came as football players and after that the businessmen arrived, but since then a more sinister element has crept in. But according to the local media, there is only one reason. Crime.

Internet scams, identity fraud, *wash wash*, prostitution rings, robbery and petty crime have all been linked to West African visitors in recent months. Naturally, the level of hostility towards them has risen to unprecedented levels.

o Legitimate Business

"We believe that the incidents seen in the media weren't wholly caused by Nigerians alone," says Nzeogu Gabriel Ikechukwu, who came to Vietnam in late 2006. For Nzeogu, the hostility leveled at Nigerians is now unbearable, worsened by the blanket ban on all Nigerian travellers attempting to enter the country.

Here to trade textiles between Vietnam and the Nigerian capital, Lagos, the current level

of controversy makes it difficult for legitimate businessmen like Nzeogu to do business.

"The government has stopped issuing visas to Nigerians and there is no way to expose my goods," he explains.

For others the situation is similar.

"The media makes it worse for us every day," says Somuadina Emmanuel, who arrived in Vietnam three years ago. "For Nigerians who pay their taxes, their rent, support their families and are good contributors, the situation is very difficult."

According to Nzeogu and Somuadina, there are only about 180 Nigerians living in Vietnam, with most living in and around Ho Chi Minh City. But walking the streets you'd feel there are more. An evening's journey to the watering holes of Pham Ngu Lao might well reveal 20 to 30 camped out at a bar enjoying the sights and sounds of one of Vietnam's most popular tourist areas. But it is this mentality that has to change.

"Most of these people you see there aren't Nigerian," says accountant Solomon Lar. "They are from Guinea, Congo, Ghana and

other African nations. It's a shame that people look at a black face and expect its Nigerian. It's making things very difficult for us now."

o The Union of Nigeria

Inspired by the troubles, Nigerians are now coming together to represent themselves in Ho Chi Minh City.

"The Immigration police asked us to organise ourselves and unionise so they can look into our problems," says Lar.

Earlier this year he and other likeminded Nigerians formed The Union of Nigeria, a conglomeration of legitimate Nigerians seeking to overdo the negative image certain individuals have bestowed on them.

"Our union lets authorities know we are legitimate people doing business," says union member, Nwanesi Collins. "It allows us a level of self-policing and to say to the authorities that we know what certain people are doing and that we are not in conjunction with them."

Whether the Union is successful in bringing about change remains to be seen. **W**