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## **Nigeria in Political Transition**

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## Nigeria in Political Transition

### SUMMARY

On June 8, 1998, General Sani Abacha, the military leader who took power in Nigeria in 1993, died of a reported heart attack and was replaced by General Abdulsalam Abubakar. On July 7, 1998, Moshood Abiola, the believed winner of the 1993 presidential election, also died of a heart attack during a meeting with U.S. officials. General Abubakar released political prisoners and initiated political, economic, and social reforms. He also established a new independent electoral commission and outlined a schedule for elections and transition to civilian rule, pledging to hand over power to an elected civilian government by May 1999.

In late February 1999, former military leader General Olusegun Obasanjo was elected president and was sworn in on May 29, 1999. Obasanjo won 62.8% of the votes (18.7 million), while his challenger, Chief Olu Falae received 37.2% of the votes (11.1 million). In mid-April 2003, President Obasanjo was re-elected, and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) won a majority in the legislative elections. The elections, however, were marred by serious irregularities and electoral fraud, according to international election observers.

Relations between the United States and Nigeria improved with the transfer of power to a civilian government. In late October 1999, President Obasanjo met with President Clinton and other senior officials in Washington. President Clinton pledged substantial increase in U.S. assistance to Nigeria. In August 2000, President Clinton paid a state visit to Nigeria. He met with President Obasanjo in Abuja and addressed the Nigerian parliament. Several new U.S. initiatives were announced, including increased support for AIDS prevention and treatment programs in Nigeria and en-

hanced trade and commercial development.

In May 2001, President Obasanjo met with President Bush and other senior officials. The two presidents discussed a wide range of issues, including trade, peacekeeping, and the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa. President Bush pledged \$200 million into a new global fund for HIV/AIDS. In fiscal year 2002, Nigeria received \$66.5 million in economic and development assistance. The Bush Administration requested \$65.2 million for FY2003 and \$63.9 million for FY2004. In early November 2001, President Obasanjo visited Washington to express his government's support for the U.S.-led anti-terrorism campaign and returned to Washington in June 2002. In July 2003, President Bush visited Nigeria while on a five-day, five-country trip to Africa.

Nigeria continues to make progress in strengthening its fragile democracy but faces serious economic challenges. With a population of over 133 million that is projected to grow to over 260 million by 2025, Nigeria remains relatively stable, although ethnic and religious clashes in some parts of the country have led to massive displacement of civilian populations. Thousands of civilians have been killed over the past several years and many more wounded in religious clashes.

Under President Obasanjo, Nigeria has emerged as a major player in Africa. President Obasanjo took a leading role in the creation of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU). President Obasanjo also played key roles in facilitating the exile of Liberian President Charles Taylor. In August 2003, Nigeria sent an estimated 1,500 troops to Liberia as part of a West African-led peacekeeping force.



## **MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

In August 2003, Nigeria sent an estimated 1,500 troops to Liberia as part of an Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) peacekeeping force. President Obasanjo's offer of asylum in Nigeria was accepted by Liberian President Charles Taylor, who is currently settled in a small town in southern Nigeria.

After hearing the August 2003 appeals of Amina Lawal, who was sentenced to death by stoning for adultery, the Appeals Court in Katsina State is expected to rule on her case on September 25, 2003.

President Bush visited Nigeria in July 2003 on his five-nation tour of Africa. Speaking at the Leon H. Sullivan Summit in Abuja, President Bush pledged to "help this vast continent of possibilities to reach its full potential" and to "not allow terrorists to threaten African peoples, or to use Africa as a base to threaten the world."

## **BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS**

### **Historical and Political Background**

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa with an estimated 133.9 million people (July 2003 estimate, CIA), has been in political turmoil and economic crisis intermittently since independence in October 1960. The current borders were demarcated by British colonial rulers in 1914, on the eve of World War I, by merging the British dependencies of Northern and Southern Nigeria into a single territory with promising economic prospects. The new Nigeria, as defined by the British, placed over 250 distinct ethnic groups under a single administrative system. Of this large number of groups, ten account for nearly 80% of the total population, and the northern Hausa-Fulani, the southwestern Yoruba, and the southeastern Ibo, have traditionally been the most politically active and dominant. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigerian political life has been scarred by conflict along both ethnic and geographic lines, marked most notably by northern and Hausa domination of the military and the civil war fought by the Ibo of Biafra from 1967 to 1970. Questions persist as to whether Nigeria and its multitude of ethnic groups can be held together as one nation, particularly in light of the degree to which misrule has undermined the authority and legitimacy of the state apparatus; but many Nigerians feel a significant degree of national pride and belief in Nigeria as a state.

Nigeria's political life has been dominated by military coups and long military-imposed transition programs to civilian rule. The military has ruled Nigeria for approximately 28 of its 43 years since independence. In August 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida ousted another military ruler, General Muhammadu Buhari, and imposed a transition program that lasted until June 1993, when Nigeria held its first election in almost a decade, believed to be won by Chief Moshood K. O. Abiola, a Yoruba businessman from the south. In the same month, General Babangida annulled the presidential election because of what he called "irregularities

in the voting” and ordered a new election with conditions that Abiola and his challenger be excluded from participating. Amid confusion and growing political unrest, Babangida handed over power to a caretaker government in August 1993, then ousted the caretaker the following November.

General Sani Abacha took power in November 1993. Abacha had been an active participant in several Nigerian military coups and was an authoritarian figure who seemed unmoved by international opinion. Beginning in 1995, Abacha imprisoned hundreds of critics, including former military leader Olusegun Obasanjo, the only Nigerian military leader to have handed over power voluntarily to an elected civilian government, and Moshood Abiola, who was charged with treason after declaring himself president following the annulled election. The senior wife of Abiola, Kudirat Abiola, was assassinated in June 1996 by unidentified men. Her daughter blamed the military junta.

In October 1995, under pressure to implement political reforms, Abacha announced a 3-year transition program to civilian rule, which he tightly controlled until his death on June 8, 1998. Abacha established the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), which published guidelines for party registration, recognized five political parties in September 1996 and officially dissolved opposition groups after refusing to recognize them. The military professed its support for Abacha should he seek reelection as a civilian, and by April 20, 1998, all five parties had nominated Abacha as the single presidential candidate despite criticism by the international community and dissident groups. Major opposition figures, especially those in exile, dismissed the transition program and called for boycotts of the parliamentary and presidential elections. Only candidates from among the five state-sanctioned political parties participated in state assembly elections held in December 1997 and parliamentary elections held on April 25, 1998. The United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), considered by many government opponents to be the army’s proxy, won widespread victories.

## **Transition to Civilian Rule**

Abacha died, reportedly of a heart attack, on June 8, 1998. The Provisional Ruling Council quickly nominated Major General Abdulsalam Abubakar to assume the presidency. General Abubakar, a career serviceman from the Northern Hausa-speaking elite, was regarded as a military intellectual. He served as chief of military intelligence under General Ibrahim Babangida and was Abacha’s chief of staff. He led the investigations of reported coup attempts by former President Olusegun Obasanjo and Lt. General Oladipo Diya, charges that, critics argue, were fabricated by the government. Following Abacha’s death, General Abubakar addressed the nation and expressed his commitment to uphold the October 1998 hand-over date to civilian government established by Abacha. In an effort to prove his commitment, Abubakar released several prominent political prisoners, including General Olusegun Obasanjo.

During a meeting with a U.S. delegation led by then Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering on July 7, 1998, Abiola suffered a heart attack and died soon after. Pro-democracy leaders immediately claimed that Abiola was murdered. The autopsy report, monitored by an independent team of Canadian, American, and British doctors, confirmed that Abiola died of natural causes due to a long-standing heart condition and that death as a result of poisoning was highly unlikely. Many observers said, however, that Abiola's care was deliberately neglected, resulting in his early demise. His death crushed the hopes of many democracy supporters and spurred riots for several days.

### Nigeria At A Glance

**Population:** 133.9 million  
**Independence:** October 1960  
**Comparative Area:** Slightly more than twice the size of California  
**Religions:** 50% Muslim, 40% Christian, 10% Indigenous beliefs  
**Languages:** English (official)  
**GDP:** \$113.5 billion (2002)  
**GDP Per Capita:** \$875 (2002)  
**Unemployment rate:** 28% (1992)  
**Exports:** \$17.3 billion (2002)  
**Imports:** \$13.6 billion (2002)  
**External Debt:** \$29.7 billion (2002)

*Source: The World Fact book, 2003*

In August and September of 1998, Abubakar undertook rapid and dramatic reforms to the Nigerian political system and economy. He replaced Abacha's top security staff and cabinet and dissolved the five political parties that Abacha had established. He abolished major decrees banning trade union activity, which had been used by Abacha to put down the political strikes that followed the nullification of the 1993 election results and ended treason charges against Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka and 14 others. Abubakar has also made a concerted effort to appeal to Nigerians in exile to return home and assist in the transition process, and many have done so, most notably Nobel Prize-winning author Wole Soyinka in mid-October. On September 7, Abubakar released the draft constitution for the next civilian government, which Abacha had kept secret, but announced on October 1 that he was setting up a committee to organize and collect views from various sections of the country, after which he would finalize changes to the draft document in order to make it "more representative and acceptable." In early May 1999, the government approved an updated version of the 1979 Nigerian constitution instead of the constitution drafted by the Abacha regime.

Abubakar outlined a specific timetable for the transition to civilian rule, with local polls on December 5, 1998, gubernatorial and state polls on January 9, followed by national assembly polls on February 20, 1999, and presidential polls on February 27. The official hand-over date was set for May 29, 1999. He also nullified all of the previous state and gubernatorial elections because they were held under the Abacha system, and dismissed the National Electoral Commission established by Abacha, replacing it with one of his own, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in early August. Political party registration for elections ended after an extension on October 12, and the INEC released the names of the nine registered parties on October 19. The three major parties were the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All People's Party (APP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). In order to be registered, a party had to be considered "national," defined as having offices in at least two-thirds of the 36 states that make up Nigeria, and furthermore must win at least 10% of votes in two-thirds of the states in the local elections in December 1998 in order to qualify a candidate for the national elections in February. Abubakar warned of the dangers of a "proliferation of political parties with parochial orientation, that may lead

to disunity and instability,” while urging political leadership to represent the will of people of all ethnic and religious groups.

The international community cautiously welcomed the transition program. Donor governments in Europe expressed support and urged transparency. French, British, and German delegations met with the Nigerian leadership in Abuja, the capital, in late July, and Abubakar made numerous trips abroad in an effort to improve relations with African and world leaders. The European Union announced in late October 1998 that, effective November 1, some sanctions would be relaxed. The visa ban was officially removed and some officials indicated that even the military measures might be lifted after the official hand-over date in May. On May 31, 1999, the European Union restored full economic cooperation with Nigeria. In late May, the Commonwealth also readmitted Nigeria as a member, after 3 years of suspension.

## Elections

In early December 1998, the PDP won in 389 out of 774 municipalities in local elections, while the All People’s Party (APP) came a distant second with 182, followed by Alliance for Democracy. In the governorship elections in early January, the PDP won 21 states out of 36, the APP won in nine states, and the AD won in six states. Shortly after the elections in January, the APP and AD began talks to merge the two political parties. However, the Independent Electoral Commission rejected a merger but agreed that the two parties “can present common candidates” for the presidential elections.

In mid-February, the People Democratic Party nominated General Olusegun Obasanjo as its presidential candidate. Obasanjo won the support of more than two-thirds of the 2,500 delegates and a northerner, Abubakar Atiku, who was elected governor in the January elections, was chosen as his running mate. The APP and AD nominated Chief Olu Falae, a Yoruba, as their joint candidate for president. A former Nigerian security chief and a northerner, Chief Umaru Shinakfi, was chosen as Falae’s running mate.

In late February 1999, General Obasanjo was elected president by a wide margin. Obasanjo won 62.8% of the votes (18.7 million), while his challenger, Chief Olu Falae received 37.2% of the votes (11.1 million). In the Senate elections, the PDP won 58% of the votes, APP 23%, and AD 19%. In the elections for the House of Representatives, PDP received 59% of the votes, AD 22%, and APP 20%.

### Highlights of Abubakar’s Transition Program

#### Rejected:

National Conference  
National Unity Government

#### Accomplished:

- Debt relief talks with World Bank and IMF
- Dissolution of old electoral commission and establishment of new Independent National Electoral Commission
- Dissolution of old political parties and registration of new parties
- Voter registration
- Annulment of elections under Abacha
- Most political prisoners freed
- Greater freedom of press, human rights better
- Publicized and amended 1995 constitution
- Dismissed Abacha officials and began investigation into misappropriated funds
- Exiled dissidents returned home
- Better-paid civil servants to combat corruption
- Repairs started on refineries, more oil imported, privatization program started
- Hand-over May 29, 1999
- Presidential elections February 27, 1999
- National assembly elections February 20, 1999
- State/Gubernatorial elections January 9, 1999
- Local elections December 5, 1998 Partial lifting of international sanctions

On May 29, 1999, Obasanjo was sworn in president and the Nigerian Senate approved 42 of 49 members of his cabinet. In his inaugural address, President Obasanjo said that “the entire Nigerian scene is very bleak indeed. So bleak people ask me where do we begin? I know what great things you expect of me at this New Dawn. As I have said many times in my extensive travels in the country, I am not a miracle worker. It will be foolish to underrate the task ahead. Alone, I can do little.”

## **The 2003 Elections**

President Obasanjo was nominated by his party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), for a second-term bid. The All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) picked former military strongman, General Muhammadu Buhari, as its presidential candidate. Meanwhile, the former Biafra rebel leader, Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, who led the secessionist war in the 1960s, was picked as the presidential candidate of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA). The National Democratic Party (NDP) picked former foreign minister Ike Nwachukwu as its presidential candidate.

In mid-April 2003, Nigerians went to the polls for the second time since military rule gave way to a civilian government. President Obasanjo was re-elected to a second term, and his PDP party won in legislative elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) declared that Obasanjo won 61.9% of the votes, while his nearest rival, General Muhammadu Buhari of ANPP, won 32.1% of the votes. The elections, however, were marred by serious irregularities and electoral fraud, according to international election observers. In the Senate, the PDP won 72 seats out of 109 seats, while the ANPP won 28 and the AD 5 seats. The PDP won 198 seats in the 360-seat House of Representatives, the ANPP 83 seats, and the AD 30 seats.

## **Current Economic and Social Conditions**

Western officials believe that Sani Abacha may have stolen more than \$3.5 billion over the course of his 5 years in power. Abacha’s former national security adviser, Ismaila Gwarzo, was accused of stealing an estimated \$2.45 billion from the Nigerian Central Bank. Swiss officials stated that about 120 accounts in Zurich and Geneva have been frozen. In early 2000, Swiss officials charged a businessman for falsifying documents to open a bank account for the Abacha family. In mid-May 2000, President Obasanjo announced that his government had recovered \$200 million in public funds looted by former Nigerian dictator Abacha and his associates. In July 2000, Nigerian authorities confirmed that Swiss officials had transferred \$64.3 million of the looted money to the Central Bank of Nigeria. In April 2002, the government of Nigeria reached an agreement with the Abacha family on the funds said to have been stolen by the late dictator. The agreement calls for the return of \$1 billion to the government of Nigeria, while the Abacha family would be allowed to keep \$100 million.

Due to decades of economic mismanagement, political instability, and widespread corruption, the education system has suffered from lack of funding, industry has idled, refineries are in poor conditions, and the sixth-largest oil-producing country in the world suffers from severe fuel shortages from time to time. The Nigerian economy depends heavily



on oil revenues; about 90-95% of Nigeria's export earnings come from petroleum and petroleum products, which also represent 90% of its foreign exchange earnings and 80% of its government revenues (Energy Administration Information, March 2003). The European Union is a major trading partner, and the United States imports more oil from sub-Saharan Africa, primarily Nigeria, than from the Middle East.

The state of the economy has most affected the poorest segments of the population and has sparked violence around the country, particularly in the oil-producing regions. Several thousand people have been killed in pipeline explosions in southeast Nigeria since the late 1990s, though the largest single toll from an explosion was approximately 1,000 in October of 1999. These explosions are triggered because people siphon off oil from holes punched in the above-ground pipeline for personal use, resulting in a loss of what's estimated to be up to 200,000 barrels of oil per day (IRIN, July 15, 2003). Ethnic clashes over rights to a promising oil prospect in the southwest also killed hundreds of people in September and October 1999. In the Niger Delta, youths from the ethnic Ijaw tribe periodically stop the flow of one-third of Nigeria's oil exports of more than two million barrels per day in order to protest sub-standard living conditions in the country's richest oil-producing region. The government established a national task force on surveillance of petroleum pipelines in order to prevent a recurrence of the pipeline explosion tragedy.

## **Humanitarian and Human Rights Concerns**

### **HIV/AIDS**

Nigeria's HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of 5.8% may seem small in comparison to some Southern African nations with seropositivity rates of over 30% of the adult population. However, the West African nation composes nearly one-tenth of the world's HIV/AIDS infected persons with 3.5 million infected people (UNAIDS 2001 estimate), the largest HIV-positive population in Africa after South Africa. Nigeria's population is expected to double by the year 2025, which will multiply the spread of the HIV virus astronomically. In addition to the devastation HIV/AIDS has caused and continues to cause among Nigeria's adult population, half of the current population is under the age of 15. With only 55% of primary school-aged children in school and the high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates among adults, Nigeria faces serious challenges and significant obstacles in the education and health care sectors (USAID Congressional Budget Justification, 2004). In late July 2001, the government of Nigeria announced a major AIDS treatment program. President Obasanjo declared that his government would provide cheap generic drugs to AIDS patients beginning September 2001. Patients are expected to pay about \$7 a month for the treatment. The government of Nigeria plans to distribute anti-retroviral drugs to an estimated 10,000 patients, but numerous obstacles have inhibited the implementation of this program.

### **Sharia**

Twelve of Nigeria's states in the Muslim-dominated North of the country have adopted Sharia law within the last four years, which has resulted in much-publicized rulings, several of which have been criticized by human rights groups as well as by Nigerians in the Southern and mostly Christian part of the country. Kano state ruled on September 1, 2003, that all

school girls attending government schools are to wear the *hijab*, Islamic head scarf, regardless of whether they are Muslim. President Obasanjo has said that the best way to respond to Sharia is to ignore it: "I think Sharia will fizzle out. To confront it is to keep it alive." In March 2002, in Katsina State, Amina Lawal, was sentenced to death by stoning after a court found her guilty of adultery. Ms. Lawal appealed her sentence in August of 2003, and the Katsina State's Appeals Court is expected to rule on September 25, 2003. In October 2001, in another highly publicized case, a Sharia court in the Sokoto State sentenced Safiya Hussaini to death for adultery. Ms. Hussaini appealed her sentence and was exonerated on the grounds that she was impregnated by her former husband and that the affair took place before Sharia law was enacted.

## Human Rights

The Bush Administration is concerned about Nigeria's poor human rights record. In its Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2002, the Department of State wrote:

The Government's human rights record remained poor; although there were improvements in several areas, serious problems remained. The national police, military, and security forces committed extrajudicial killings and used excessive force to apprehend criminal suspects and to quell several incidents of ethno-religious violence. Police, military, and security forces sometimes beat protesters, criminal suspects, detainees, and convicted prisoners. The Government continued steps to curb torture and beatings of detainees and prisoners. In most cases, neither the state anticrime task forces, the police, nor the military were held accountable for excessive force or the death of persons in custody. Shari'a courts sentenced persons to harsh punishments including amputations and death by stoning; however, no amputation or stoning sentences were carried out during the year. Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening, and the lack of sufficient food and adequate medical treatment contributed to the death of numerous inmates. Police and security forces continued to use arbitrary arrest and detention. Prolonged pretrial detention remained a serious problem. The judicial system often was incapable of providing criminal suspects with speedy and fair trials. Government authorities occasionally infringed on citizen's privacy rights. The Government generally respected freedom of speech and of the press; however, there were problems in some areas. The Government placed some limits on freedom of assembly and association, citing security concerns. There were governmental restrictions placed on freedom of religion. The Government occasionally restricted freedom of movement for security reasons in areas of unrest and used lethal force at checkpoints. The Human Rights Violations Investigation Panel (HRVIP) concluded its public hearings and in 2001 presented its findings and recommendations to the President, but the report has not been made public.

## The United States and Nigeria

Relations between Washington and Abuja began to improve shortly after General Abubakar assumed power and have since continued to grow during President Bush's term in office. In September 1998, Abubakar visited the United States for the U.N. General Assembly meeting, and also came to Washington to meet with President Clinton at the White House. After the meeting, Abubakar said President Clinton told him that if Nigeria stayed on its democratic course, the United States was prepared to help win some debt relief from international lending institutions and might also allow the resumption of direct air links

between the U.S. and Nigeria. U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright also praised Abubakar for “taking steps to bring Nigeria back into the world community” (*New York Times*, September 25, 1998). U.S. officials applauded Abubakar’s transition program and warmly welcomed the transfer of power to an elected civilian government and promised to work closely with the Obasanjo government.

In mid-October 1999, then Secretary of State Albright visited Nigeria and met with senior government officials and civil society groups. At a press briefing following her Africa tour, Secretary Albright stated that the government and people of Nigeria are “engaged in a dramatic and high-stakes struggle to establish a viable democratic system.” She said President Obasanjo “appears truly committed to jump-starting the economy, fighting corruption and resolving regional problems that remain a source of unrest within Nigeria.” In late October 1999, President Obasanjo met with President Clinton and other senior government officials in Washington. At a White House press briefing, President Clinton said that “it is very much in America’s interests that Nigeria succeed, and therefore we should assist them in their success. We intend to increase our assistance to Nigeria to expand law-enforcement cooperation and to work toward an agreement to stimulate trade and investment between us. We intend to do what we can to help Nigeria recover assets plundered by the previous regime.” President Clinton stated that the United States will support “generous debt rescheduling through the Paris Club and encourage other countries to take further steps.”

In a meeting with President Obasanjo in Abuja on August 26, 2000, President Clinton stated that the United States is “committed to working with the people of Nigeria to help build stronger institutions, improve education, fight disease, crime and corruption, ease the burden of debt and promote trade and investment in a way that brings more of the benefits of prosperity to people who have embraced democracy.” Clinton also made an unprecedented address before the Nigerian parliament in which he underscored the major issues facing Nigeria today, including democratization and ethnic and religious strife. President Clinton announced a number of new initiatives during his Nigeria visit. He pledged \$60 million for AIDS vaccine research and more than \$20 million for Obasanjo’s campaigns against malaria, polio, and HIV/AIDS. He also praised Nigeria’s regional leadership and promised continued U.S. support for the West African peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone. He pledged continued U.S. support for education, including the provision of Internet access through the work of NGOs and universities.

In May 2001, President Obasanjo met with President Bush and other senior officials in Washington. President Bush stated that the United States is “in the process of helping provide technical assistance to Nigerian troops so that they are better able to keep those peace missions.” At a joint White House press conference, President Bush pledged \$200 million to a new global fund for HIV/AIDS. President Obasanjo said he discussed a number of issues of mutual interest, including the conflicts in Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone.

President Obasanjo returned to the White House following the September 11, 2001, attacks to discuss Nigeria’s and United States’ “mutual concern to fight and win the war against terror.” Returning again to Washington in June 2002 and receiving President Bush on his first official state visit to Africa in July of 2003, President Obasanjo has cultivated a friendship with President Bush. In a speech concluding his week-long trip to Africa,

President Bush emphasized the importance of “partnerships” and underscored that “the relationship between America and Africa will benefit both our people” (see White House press release [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/07/print/20030712.html>]).

## **U.S.-Nigerian Relations: Background**

Three primary issues have dominated U.S.-Nigerian relations in the last two decades: the absence of democracy, human rights abuses, and drug trafficking. Washington took a series of measures against the military junta shortly after the 1993 election results were annulled. These included suspending development assistance, terminating joint military training with Nigeria, and imposing visa restrictions of Nigeria’s military leaders and their family members. These measures, however, did not affect trade between U.S. companies and Nigeria. Washington was also engaged in diplomatic efforts, albeit unsuccessful, to break the political impasse in the West African nation. The Clinton Administration sent civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, then-U.N. Ambassador Bill Richardson, and former Ambassador Donald McHenry as envoys to convince Abacha to implement reforms.

In response to the execution of nine Ogoni activists in 1995, the Clinton Administration recalled its ambassador and pushed a resolution at the U.N. General Assembly that condemned Nigeria’s action. The imprisonment of Moshood Abiola and many others was a contentious issue in U.S.-Nigerian relations. In its Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997, the Department of State wrote: “The human rights record remained dismal. Throughout the year, Abacha’s Government relied regularly on arbitrary detention and harassment to silence its most outspoken critics.” The report further stated that security forces “continued to commit extrajudicial killings and use excessive force to quell anti-government protests as well as to combat crime, resulting in the death or injury of many individuals, including innocent civilians.” Human rights groups reported the torture of prisoners and constant harassment of journalists under the Abacha regime.

Washington’s concern was not limited to human rights abuse allegations. Drug trafficking by Nigeria emerged as a major issue in U.S.-Nigerian relations after the mid-1980s. Although Nigeria is not a drug-producing country, it has become a major transit point. An estimated 35-40% of all the heroin coming into the United States is brought by Nigerian couriers. In 1989, the United States and Nigeria established a joint Counter-Narcotics Task Force. Lack of cooperation by Nigerian authorities in combating the drug trafficking problem led to a decision by the Clinton Administration in March 1998, as in 1994 and 1996, to put Nigeria on the State Department’s list of non-cooperative drug trafficking nations, which includes Burma and Iran. As a consequence, the U.S. had to vote “no” on all loans to Nigeria being considered by the World Bank and the African Development Bank, and Nigeria was ineligible for any Export-Import Bank financing of U.S. exports.

In March 2000, however, President Clinton provided a waiver, a Vital National Interests Certification, for Nigeria in order to allow support for the democratic transition program. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Nigeria’s anti narcotic efforts remained “unfocused and lacking in material support.” According to the DEA (Lagos), despite the new government’s efforts in dealing with the problem, “Nigerian law enforcement agencies did not significantly improve their counter-drug performance in 1999” [<http://www.usembassy.state.gov/nigeria/>]. Nigerian authorities point to the government’s

active cooperation with U.S. officials and increased funds appropriated by the Nigerian government to fight drug trafficking. In March 2001, however, the Bush Administration certified that Nigeria was fully cooperating with U.S. officials. According to a U.S. embassy (Lagos) press release, “in spite of continued problems with corruption and a weak judicial system, the Nigerian government has shown a commitment to improving its efforts in fighting organized crime and drug trafficking [http://usembassy.state.gov/nigeria].”

Through legislative action, Members of Congress were active concerning Nigeria. In 1994, the House of Representatives passed H.Con.Res. 151, which called for additional measures against the military junta by the Clinton Administration. A bill calling for the imposition of sanctions and freezing of assets was introduced in 1996 by then-Senator Nancy Kassebaum and Representative Donald M. Payne. Although the bill enjoyed significant bipartisan support, it did not move out of committees, in part because of opposition by Members of Congress who favored dialogue with the Nigerian government. Pro-Nigerian groups and some American business interests actively opposed the bill (*Washington Post*, November 24, 1996). The Nigerian Democracy Act, introduced by Representative Donald Payne and Representative Amo Houghton in 1997, contained similar provisions, including a ban on new U.S. corporate investment in Nigeria. In May 1998 House International Relations Committee Chairman Benjamin A. Gilman and Representative Donald M. Payne introduced the Nigerian Democracy and Civil Society Empowerment Act (H.R. 3890), calling for additional sanctions and increased U.S. aid to democratic opposition groups. The bill was also introduced in the Senate in May 1998 by Senators Feingold, Jeffords, Leahy, and Wellstone. The bill was sent to committees in both houses, but the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress did not act further on either piece of legislation.

Conflicts within the Clinton Administration regarding the appropriate strategy toward Nigeria while under the control of Abacha surfaced in speeches given by senior Administration officials and President Clinton in early 1998. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Dr. Susan Rice stated in a speech on March 17, 1998, that the United States would hold “General Abacha to his 3-year-old promise to undertake a genuine transition to civilian rule this year and to establish a level playing field by allowing free political activity, providing for an open press, and ending political detention. Let me state clearly and unequivocally to you today that an election victory by any military candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections would be unacceptable.” In late March, President Clinton stated that U.S. policy toward Nigeria was “to do all that we can to persuade General Abacha to move toward general democracy and respect for human rights, release of political prisoners, and the holding of elections.” Referring to General Abacha’s rumored candidacy, however, President Clinton seemed to contradict Rice by suggesting that “if [Abacha] stands for election we hope he will stand as a civilian.” President Clinton’s March statement led some critics to question the Administration’s policy toward Abacha and the military junta.

The Administration came to a final decision on May 28, saying that the proposed transition was clearly “unacceptable” as long as Abacha remained the single candidate and that current sanctions would remain (*The Washington Post*, May 29, 1998). Following Abacha’s death, State Department spokesman James P. Rubin stated that Abubakar had “a historic opportunity to open the political process and institute a swift and credible transition to civilian democratic rule.” Rubin said that Washington would “accept” only a transition that included “three things: first, freeing political prisoners; second, ensuring respect for the basic freedoms of speech, press, and assembly; and third, returning the Nigerian army to its

rightful position as a professional armed force committed to defending the constitution and civilian rule.” U.S. officials had anticipated that Abubakar would be more cooperative with the United States because he received military training here. On June 14, 1998, President Clinton called Abubakar and “underscored our desire for improved bilateral relations in the context of Nigeria taking swift and significant steps toward a successful transition to a democratically-elected government” (*Associated Press*, June 14, 1998).

The U.S. officials who met with Abubakar in July 1998 reported that he appeared very receptive to implementing the transition to democracy, although he would continue consultations before releasing the final details of the transition. Critics asserted that the United States should have pushed harder for Abiola’s unconditional release in order for him to consult with advisers rather than consent to renouncing his title under political pressure. Critics also warned that a hands-off policy could enable the regime to proceed slowly with reforms that may escalate civil conflict to the point of war in which ethnic rivalries could erupt on a massive scale. The Clinton Administration, nonetheless, welcomed Abubakar’s transition program, and on October 30, 1998, the U.S. State Department announced that the Secretary, after consulting with Members of Congress, has terminated a Presidential Proclamation that restricted entry into the United States by high-ranking Nigerian officials and their family members.

**Table 1. U.S. Assistance to Nigeria**  
(\$ millions, fiscal years)

Program	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003 Est.	2004 Req.
DA	3.5	10	10.5	30.9	18.5	23.9	12.6
CSH	3.5	6.8	17.0	23.3	37.0	41.4	46.3
ESF	—	6.9	20.0	23.4		0.0	5.0
FMF Grants	—	—	10.0				
Peace Corps	—	—	—				
IMET	—	0.09	0.60				
<b>Total</b>	<b>7.0</b>	<b>23.80</b>	<b>58.1</b>	<b>77.7</b>	<b>55.6</b>	<b>65.2</b>	<b>63.9</b>

**Table Abbreviations:**

DA=Development Assistance

CSH=Child Survival and Health Programs Fund

ESF=Economic Support Fund

IMET=International Military Education and Training