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Organizations

“Nigeria on the Brink?”

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Mr. Chairman, ranking member Karen Bass, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), I appreciate the opportunity to discuss current political developments in Nigeria in light of the upcoming general elections planned for next month. Since Nigeria’s transition from military to civilian rule in 1998/99, NDI and other U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations have worked with Nigerian legislators, party leaders, and civil society activists to support the country’s nascent democracy. NDI also has fielded international election observer missions to every national election within this time frame. Credible and peaceful general elections next month would allow Nigeria to strengthen its democracy and serve as an example for the entire continent; however, even the most optimistic analysts acknowledge that the country faces significant challenges that undermine some of the gains of the 2011 polls. By all estimation, the 2015 elections will be the most competitive in the country’s post 1999 history, with two closely matched presidential contenders.

I. Introduction

To raise public confidence in Nigeria’s electoral process and support violence-free polls, NDI together with the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted an international pre-election assessment mission to Abuja this month, with funding from the U.S. Department of State. The delegation met with the chairman and senior officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), one presidential candidate, senior representatives of another candidate, leaders of political parties, civic organizations, professional associations and religious bodies, as well as legislators and senior government officials. The objectives of the mission were to evaluate the political environment and election preparations, and to demonstrate international solidarity and support for Nigerian democrats. I was part of that delegation and just returned from Nigeria last Thursday. I would like to submit the delegation’s statement for the record. NDI also will deploy international observers to monitor election day proceedings.

Since Nigeria’s transition to civilian rule in 1999, following four decades of intermittent military rule and episodes of instability, the country experienced a steady decline in the transparency and credibility of its polls until 2011. International and domestic election observers noted substantial improvements in election administration in 2011, due in large part to the integrity of a newly appointed chairman of INEC Professor Attahiru Jega, the deployment of university graduates as poll workers, and the extensive efforts at voter education and election monitoring by Nigerian civil society organizations. There was no evidence of widespread misconduct or fraud. At the

same time, many Nigerians were surprised that violence broke out at the announcement of election results in northern cities such as Kano and Kaduna, which inexplicably had been won by the opposition candidate. More than 800 people were killed, tens of thousands of people were internally displaced, and lots of property was destroyed.¹

The just-completed pre-election assessment mission was NDI's 13th international election-related mission to Nigeria. The Institute has maintained an in-country presence in Nigeria since 1998, providing technical assistance to the National Assembly and civil society organizations. In the specific area of election monitoring and violence prevention around elections, NDI has steadily deepened its technical assistance to Nigerian organizations, with a view to strengthening their capacity to monitor the elections in all 36 states and the Federal Capitol Territory, and to detect and report early signs of violence as a conflict prevention measure. The Institute's work in Nigeria is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and other donors.

II. 2015 Elections: In the Eye of the Storm

The 2015 elections will take place in a difficult political and security environment. The country is experiencing an unprecedented level of polarization along regional, religious, and partisan lines. These cleavages are further exacerbated by citizen dissatisfaction over the economy, the Boko Haram insurgency, poor delivery of public services, and the persistence of large-scale corruption. According to a Gallup poll released earlier this month, about nine in 10 Nigerians view government corruption as widespread.² Other aggravating circumstances include the following:

- Nigeria has a history of election related violence. Every national election since 1999 has been tainted by incidents of violence. Notably, the 2003 polls were marked by high levels of political violence and vandalized, stolen and stuffed ballot boxes, while the 2007 electoral process did little to build public confidence in the country's nascent political institutions. The observations of the NDI delegation that year mirrored those of other observer groups, including the European Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and IRI, all of which concurred that the 2007 electoral process, in the words of the NDI delegation, "failed the Nigerian people and did not meet minimum international standards for democratic elections." The polls were marred by pre-election and election-day violence and intimidation. While the 2011 general elections were a significant improvement, and observers agreed they more adequately reflected the votes cast by Nigerians, wide-scale violence broke out in many northern cities after the announcement of election results.
- Many Nigerians are therefore fearful that because the candidate of the ruling People's

1 "Nigeria: Post-election Violence Killed 800," Human Rights Watch, May 17, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800>.

2 Jay Loschky, "Ahead of Polls, Few Nigerians Trust in Elections," Gallup, 13 January 2015, available at http://www.gallup.com/poll/180914/ahead-poll-few-nigerians-trust-elections.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_content=morelink&utm_campaign=syndication.

Democratic Party (PDP) is a Christian from the South and the candidate of the leading opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), is a Muslim from the North, clashes between their supporters could degenerate into violence along religious and regional lines. As was the case after the announcement of results in 2011, violence could erupt in parts of the North if the APC flag-bearer, General Muhammadu Buhari, loses to incumbent Goodluck Jonathan (PDP), or in parts of the South if Buhari wins.

- In such a charged political environment, Boko Haram extremists pose a major threat to the conduct of a peaceful election. Since 2009, Boko Haram has committed acts of indiscriminate violence against civilians, places of worship, and police and military installations, particularly in northern states. Casualties number in the thousands and the death toll continues to mount. On January 8, up to 2,000 people were reported dead or missing after Boko Haram attacked Baga in Borno State close to the border of Nigeria and Chad. Amnesty International called the massacre of civilians in Baga the deadliest of Boko Haram's attacks to date.³ There is also a possibility that to make a political statement and disrupt the electoral process, Boko Haram could strike outside its strongholds in the northeast, even in states that have not been subjected to attacks in the past.
- Boko Haram now has an extensive presence in three states in the north eastern part of the country – Borno, Yobe and Adamawa – which have a total of approximately 4.5 million registered voters. Ongoing terrorist attacks and killings in Borno State and several local government areas (LGAs) in Yobe and Adamawa States could lead to the disenfranchisement of a large number of voters if elections cannot be held in those areas. Should that happen, it could call into question the legitimacy of the election, as the affected states are known to be the stronghold of one of the leading presidential candidates.
- The Boko Haram insurgency has also caused hundreds of thousands of Nigerians to flee their homes in northeastern Nigeria. Many of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) are not likely to return to their home constituencies before election day. As INEC pursues consultations with political parties and other election stakeholders on ways to facilitate IDP voting, there is a growing concern that the disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of IDPs could also call into question the legitimacy of the election outcome, especially in a close contest.
- Nigerians' discontent with public service delivery and declining faith in national government, which stands at 29 percent, down from 55 percent at the time of the 2011 polls.⁴

³ "Amnesty: Nigeria massacre deadliest in history of Boko Haram," Washington Post, January 9, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/7-kids-reunite-with-parents-lost-in-nigeria-islamic-uprising/2015/01/09/56d9b918-97e4-11e4-8385-866293322c2f_story.html.

⁴ Jay Loschky, cited above.

III. Nigeria Pulling Back from the Brink

Despite the challenges listed above, Nigeria still has the ability to pull itself back from the brink. As a highly respected religious leader told the NDI/IRI delegation two weeks ago, “We Nigerians have perfected the art of dancing on the brink, but it is an uncomfortable place to be.” There is a strong commitment by INEC, civil society organizations and some political leaders to enhance citizen confidence and participation in the elections, and to mitigate violence around the polls.

INEC

After the 2011 polls, the public’s trust in INEC rose significantly. The Commission has since successfully administered a number of state elections and is taking concrete steps to prepare for next month’s polls. INEC has undertaken a number of innovative actions to reinforce the integrity of the electoral system. These include:

- **Biometric registration** – INEC has done a thorough audit of the voter registry, capturing voters’ biometric data and eliminating double entries, underage voters and the deceased. Close to five million unqualified voters were expunged from the voter rolls as a result.
- **Permanent voter cards (PVCs)** – INEC has produced PVCs for eligible voters to use in all elections from 2015 onward. The PVCs contain a machine-readable chip that stores voters’ biometric data information, including fingerprints and facial image, thereby providing adequate security features to reduce vulnerability to counterfeiting and deny access to voting by unregistered persons.
- **Voter card readers** – INEC plans to use electronic voter card reading machines during the 2015 polls to scan voters’ PVCs for identification and authentication. The card readers will allow INEC to track numbers of accredited voters per polling station and compare them to the number of voters listed on the results sheets, thereby hindering the inflation of voter numbers noted in some polling sites and states during past elections.

If successfully implemented, these positive measures taken by INEC could enhance the integrity of the electoral process. They are, however, contingent upon the PVCs and other materials being delivered on time to voters and polling sites, and INEC overcoming all of the logistical challenges that have undermined previous polls.

In addition, to facilitate **IDP voting**, INEC has created a task force on IDPs whose recommendations have informed practical steps currently under consideration. If accepted by political parties and other stakeholders, these measures would allow IDPs residing in camps within the state of origin in which they were registered to cast their ballot in specially designated polling places.

- On the specific issue of **election security**, since 2011, INEC launched (and co-chairs with the national security adviser) the “Interagency Consultative Committee on Election Security” (ICCES), to facilitate seamless coordination among various governmental

agencies charged with providing security around elections. ICCES committees have been created at the state and LGA levels as well. The platform aims to bring together election officials and security agencies to jointly map out strategies to ensure violence-free polls. In the recent past, the platform was recognized as playing a constructive role in ensuring gubernatorial elections did not experience election violence.

Civil society

Nigeria's vibrant civil society has been a driving force in the promotion of an inclusive, transparent and peaceful electoral process. Many prominent individuals and organizations are working tirelessly to get Nigerians to exercise their democratic rights and civic responsibility, and to ensure that the elections are peaceful. Examples of civil society initiatives include:

- **Get-out-the-vote (GOTV) and voter education campaigns** targeting youth, such as the “*Vote Not Fight: Election no be war*” campaign launched by the well-known Nigerian artist *2face Idibia* in collaboration with the *Youngstars Foundation*, and with technical assistance from NDI; and the mobile voter education application produced by the *9jaVoter Project* implemented by the *West African NGO Network (WANGONeT)*.
- **Initiatives aimed at promoting violence-free polls**, such as *Enough is Enough's* RSVP, or *Register, Select, Vote and Protect* campaign; the non-violence awareness raising conducted by the *Youth Alliance on Constitution and Electoral Reform (YACORE)*, focusing on youth in northern states; or various inter-faith initiatives launched by highly respected Muslim and Christian leaders to appeal for violence-free polls and mitigate polarization along religious lines.
- **Early warning systems.** The *Transition Monitoring Group (TMG)*, a coalition of more than 400 civil society organizations, is gathering and analyzing nationwide data on acts of violence, and how to identify early warning signs of violence. TMG has trained and deployed citizen observers in all 774 LGAs of the country. Since mid-November, these citizen observers have been using text messages to track election preparations and triggers of electoral violence. Biweekly responses from these citizen observers to pre-set questionnaires are collated in a central database, analyzed and tracked over time. This information is widely disseminated to raise public awareness, deter further acts of violence, and facilitate contingency planning by the appropriate security services. Observer reports are supplemented by social media hate speech monitoring by NDI-Nigeria staff using a Harvard University-developed technology tool, *Crimson Hexagon*.

In addition to the examples above, domestic and international election monitoring groups will deploy thousands of observers across the country on election day to enhance the electoral process by strengthening citizen voices, expanding space for citizen engagement, and holding election authorities and candidates more accountable. As of January 24, INEC has accredited 97 observer groups, including 78 domestic and 19 international.

For the 2015 polls, NDI's domestic observation partner, TMG, has adopted the PVT methodology, which draws on statistical principles to provide real-time qualitative and

quantitative assessments of voting day through data-driven observations. The PVT methodology also allows for verification of the official election results. Using the PVT methodology and employing short message service (SMS) communication to submit checklist responses, TMG will, as during the 2011 presidential election, conduct a systematic observation of voting and counting at a representative random sample drawn from the totality of 120,000 polling sites. TMG will deploy and receive reports from observers to be stationed at 1,507 polling sites in all 774 LGAs located in all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. TMG has recruited 3,014 observers for the PVT Quick Count. It is worth noting that the 2011 PVT conducted in Nigeria was the largest undertaken in the world, involving close to 8,000 citizen observers.

Women's organizations

Women's organizations across the country are engaged in the promotion of violence-free and inclusive political campaigns, encouraging women to participate in the elections. Electoral violence, or the fear of violence, is a major deterrent for women to engage effectively in politics.

- To monitor and mitigate the violence that affects women as candidates and voters Nigerian women's organizations have created a nationwide Women Platform for Peaceful Elections, chaired by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The platform has organized the Nigerian Women Situation Room, which would serve as a forum for dialogue and advocacy for peaceful elections. Members of the platform include leaders of women's CSOs representing Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, and associations of women parliamentarians and councilors. In partnership with the media, the platform has stimulated inclusive dialogue on women's participation in electoral processes, and has advocated for an enabling environment for women's safe participation in the polls.
- Other examples of women's organizations that are conducting gender sensitive voter education and monitoring of the electoral process include the 100 Women Lobby Group, which has monitored and published its findings on discrimination against female candidates during party primaries.

The media

To promote violence-free elections, encourage balanced reporting and further collaboration across regional, ethnic and religious lines, the Nigerian media is engaged in various initiatives, such as organizing candidate debates for presidential and vice-presidential candidates to push the candidates to focus on issues rather than personalities and other divisive tactics. These planned debates, should they take place, would send a strong message to Nigerians across the country that competition for high office entails meaningful discussion of issues pertinent to the electorate and should not result in violence.

- Also, groups such as Search for Common Ground (SFCG) are conducting media synergy and journalist exchange programs. SFCG is working with 16 radio stations covering all six geopolitical zones. The initiative is part of the USAID-funded Electoral Empowerment of Civil Society Project, which NDI is implementing alongside SFCG and

other partners. Last week SFCG concluded a three-day media training for journalists from across the country on mitigating violence, trauma reporting and responsible political reporting.

Political Parties

The merger of four leading opposition parties into one single party (the APC) has created a viable opposition, unlike the splintered opposition alliances of the past, thereby underscoring the need for parties and candidates to field poll watchers in all polling places in the country.

The two major parties have undertaken several measures to improve the electoral process and ensure credible and peaceful elections. For example:

- Unlike in previous years, at least one of the major political parties organized primaries for the presidential nomination that were widely perceived as open, transparent and competitive. This has significantly raised the bar on conducting party primaries in Nigeria.
- On January 14, 11 of the 14 presidential candidates, including the two front-runners, signed a public pledge for a peaceful election, the “Abuja Accord,” in the presence of former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. The accord commits the signatories to run issue-based campaigns at national, state and local government levels; to refrain from violent acts and inflammatory speech before, during and after the elections; and to speak out against any such violence. The image of incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan and opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari embracing publicly following the signature of the accord is widely hailed as an encouraging development. The agreement provides a benchmark against which civil society, the media and the international community can hold candidates, their parties, and their supporters accountable for good conduct during the elections. Since the delegation visited Abuja there have been a few incidents in which candidates have been the subject of verbal attacks and disrespectful conduct. For example, in mid-January a PDP political leader published a paid newspaper advertisement in which he insinuated that the APC candidate was in poor health; a few days later, while campaigning in an APC stronghold, the PDP candidate’s convoy was stoned by youth members of the APC. Unlike in the past when such incidents resulted in spiraling violence, this time parties have called on each other to ask their supporters to desist from such actions and to respect the spirit and letter of the Abuja Accord.

IV. The Way Forward

Under normal circumstances, conducting national elections in Nigeria is no easy feat. And these are not normal times. The stakes are extremely high for Nigeria. Extraordinary steps will therefore have to be taken to ensure that the polls are peaceful and credible, so their outcome can be accepted by the majority of Nigerians. At this critical moment in the lead-up to these very important polls, friends of Nigeria should send a strong message to the government of Nigeria and the Nigerian people, underscoring their support for violence-free and credible elections. They should also appeal to the election management body (INEC) and the government of Nigeria

to provide security to voters before, during and after election day, and to guarantee proper administration of the polls.

The Nigerian people are to be commended for their efforts to increase citizen participation and enhance prospects for peaceful elections, and must be encouraged to do more in the remaining weeks of the pre-election period, on election day, and most importantly in the post-election period.

The international community should expand and intensify its observation efforts to provide objective and nonpartisan assessments of, and recommendations on the electoral process, prior, during and after the election, with a clear message that election-related violence will have consequences for the legitimacy of the election outcome. While acknowledging the tremendous resources that have been mobilized by the government of Nigeria and development partners in the preparations for the polls, it is extremely important that additional resources be made available for contingency plans to safeguard the peace and further consolidate the democratic gains that would emerge from a meaning electoral process.

V. Conclusion

The 2015 polls provide an opportunity for political parties, INEC, the government, media and civil society to build upon and expand the advances from 2011 to ensure inclusive, peaceful and credible elections. The country does not need to stay on the brink in perpetuity. Should the 2015 polls be peaceful and credible, Nigeria would have a lot going for it. Nigeria remains Africa's most populous nation with approximately 174 million inhabitants, and 68.8 million eligible voters for the upcoming general elections. In 2014, Nigeria became the leading economy in Africa based on the most up-to-date economic data, overtaking South Africa. The country's vibrant private sector, civil society, labor unions and professional associations are essential ingredients for a democratic society. The outcome of these elections will have significant implications for the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee.