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Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International
Organizations

“The U.S. Role in Helping Nigeria Confront Boko Haram and Other Threats in Northern
Nigeria”

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Mr. Chairman, ranking member Ms. Bass, and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), I appreciate the opportunity to discuss current security challenges and threats in Northern Nigeria.

Since Nigeria’s 1999 transition from military to civilian rule, NDI has worked closely with Nigerian legislators, political party leaders and civil society activists to support democratic institutions and practices in the country. With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of State, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Ford Foundation and U.K.’s Department for International Development (DFID), NDI’s work has helped support Nigerian efforts to advance democratic governance and electoral processes that reflect the will of the people.

I. Current Challenges Facing Northern Nigeria

In May 2015, Nigeria’s newly elected President, Muhammadu Buhari, took office following elections that saw the country’s first peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another. President Buhari and his government inherited several major economic and security challenges, particularly in the country’s northern states, where approximately 40,000 people had been killed by violence between 2011 and 2015.¹ The region has experienced political and economic marginalization, unbalanced development, corruption, and poor delivery of public services.

North East Nigeria has also borne the brunt of the ongoing surge of violent extremism. Boko Haram, a group that promotes a fundamentalist religious ideology, has caused nearly 15,000

¹ Council on Foreign Relations, *Nigeria Security Tracker*.

deaths since 2009. Moreover, more than 2.2 million Nigerians are internally displaced, with approximately 200,000 others now refugees in neighboring countries.² Also, the vast majority of approximately 5.4 million people in need emergency food assistance across the Lake Chad basin region are Nigerian, as Boko Haram related violence has devastated infrastructure and disrupted economic activity.³ Human Rights Watch estimates that over 2,000 schools in northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger have closed or been destroyed by the Boko Haram insurgency.⁴ In March 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), declaring itself the Islamic State's West Africa Province.

Since May 2015, the Nigerian military, in tandem with a multinational military task force comprising troops from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin, has scored military successes against Boko Haram, reclaiming much of the group's self-described "Islamic Caliphate" that, at one time, spanned roughly 20,000 square miles (twice the size of the state of Maryland). Despite losses on the battlefield, Boko Haram remains a potent force and continues to stage attacks against "soft" targets such as markets and refugee camps. Approximately 3,350 people have been killed by Boko Haram since May 2015.⁵

Besides the Boko Haram crisis in the North East, intercommunal conflicts between agrarian and pastoralist communities have caused 6,000 deaths since 2011, about 600 of which have occurred since the beginning of this year.⁶ A 2015 report by Mercy Corps, a U.S. based organization, found that violence has contributed to negative economic growth and that Nigeria could gain approximately \$13.7 billion dollars a year in macroeconomic activity in the four most affected states were it not for the agrarian-pastoralist conflict.⁷ The communities most affected are in northern and central Nigeria and the Middle Belt (stretching from Kwara and Niger states in the west to Adamawa state in the east). Recently, intercommunal skirmishes have occurred in the country's South East zone, underscoring the national ramifications of simmering tensions and violence.⁸

² UNHCR, *Operation Sahel: Nigeria Situation*.

³ USAID, *Lake Chad Basin - Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #7, FY2016*, April 27, 2016.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, *They Set the Classrooms on Fire*, April 11, 2016.

⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, *Nigeria Security Tracker*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mercy Corps International, *The Economic Costs of Conflict and the Benefits of Peace: Effects of Farmer-Pastoralist Conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt on State, Sector, and National Economies*, July 2015.

⁸ For example, recent attacks in Benue state in February resulted in the decimation of entire villages across 13 local government areas (LGAs) and displaced as many as 20,000 people. Of Nigeria's estimated 2.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), about 12.5 percent (269,000 people) are believed to be uprooted as a result of intercommunal clashes (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Nigeria IDP Figures Analysis*, December 31, 2015).

II. Conflicts Underpinned by Governance Gaps in Northern Nigeria

The enduring catalyst of violent intercommunal conflicts can be attributable in large part to challenges in governance and extremely poor delivery of public services.

- **The North-South divide in development**

According to Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics, as of 2010 (prior to the emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency), approximately 69 percent of Nigerians in the North East lived on less than a dollar per day.⁹ The violence of these past years has exacerbated the situation, as infrastructure has been dilapidated, investment has dried up, and local economic activity has been undermined. Poverty levels in Nigeria's North East and North West zones are estimated to be 40 percent higher than in the country's South West zone, and unemployment levels three times higher.¹⁰ In April 2014, a cabinet Minister described the North East's troubles as "an inclusion problem," acknowledging that "the human development indicators in that part of the country are among the lowest."¹¹

- **Access to land and water resources**

At the heart of the conflict between Nigeria's agrarian and pastoralist communities is a competition for increasingly scarce land and water resources. As a result of the surge in demographics and urbanization, land use now encroaches on traditional grazing routes and water sources previously used exclusively by pastoralists, thereby bringing pastoralists and agrarian communities into closer contact within a more competitive environment. Climate change is also expanding desertification across the Sahel region, and is pushing herdsmen and their cattle further south, putting greater strain on land and water resources in those parts of the country too.

- **Convergence of criminal activity and proliferation of small arms and light weapons**

Attacks on agrarian communities by pastoral-affiliated groups across the Middle Belt and incidences of cattle rustling have led to a vicious cycle of revenge attacks on neighboring communities. At the same time, the rising price of beef in West Africa has made cattle theft a lucrative enterprise for criminal gangs that steal and transport cattle to markets, sometimes across national borders. It is alleged that Boko Haram elements have also participated and benefited

⁹ National Bureau of Statistics, *Nigeria Poverty Profile 2010*, January 2012.

¹⁰ Kate Meagher, "Beyond terror: addressing the Boko Haram challenge in Nigeria," *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center*, November 2014.

¹¹ Reuters, "Nigeria can handle Boko Haram, part of 'raw democracy', says minister," April 28, 2014.

from some of the illicit trade in cattle. Recently, the Borno state government shut down four major cattle markets in an attempt to choke cash flow to the group.¹²

The Boko Haram insurgency and violence from intercommunal rivalries between pastoralists and the agrarian community have been fueled in part by the proliferation of small arms coming across Nigeria's porous borders, particularly since the fall of Muammar Khaddafi and his regime in Libya in 2011. According to the New York Times,¹³ last month the U.S. military intercepted a weapons convoy from Libya that was bound for the Lake Chad region and seized small caliber weapons, rifles and machine guns. As Boko Haram loses the military battle and splinters into small cells, many Nigerians are fearful that some of its fighters will create criminal networks within the pastoralist communities that could potentially continue to carry out intermittent attacks on agrarian communities.

- **Non-inclusive governance**

Nigeria is a Federation of over 500 ethnic groups and local languages; however, there is a perception that the country's governance, especially at the local and state levels, lags behind in responding to the needs and grievances of ethnic minorities in the different localities. Moreover, it is notable that in Nigeria, political power provides privileged access to state resources and other economic advantages. In the north, the very visible disparity in wealth and wellbeing between the haves and the have nots has created extreme frustrations and a cycle of resentment.

By some accounts, attempts to adopt Sharia law in parts of Nigeria in 1999 stemmed, in part, from the belief among sizable segments of the population in northern states of Nigeria that strict adherence to Islamic law could help 'cleanse the corrupt political system.' Although 12 Northern states adopted a dual system of Sharia and common law, living conditions in the states did not change as corruption and neglect persisted. One of the battle cries of Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, around 2009 was that Northern elites had co-opted Sharia law. In recent interviews with Mercy Corps, former Boko Haram members asserted that widespread frustration with the government led to their initial embrace of the insurgency. Close to 50 percent of respondents also claimed that their communities supported Boko Haram at some point in hopes that the insurrection would bring about a change in governance within their communities. As one former youth member explained, "we have lost faith in any government assistance."¹⁴

¹² Morgan Winsor, "Nigeria Shuts Down Cattle Markets Allegedly Financing Boko Haram," International Business Times, March 14, 2016; see also Business Day, "Boko Haram cattle rustling prompts market shut-down in Nigeria," March 6, 2016.

¹³ Helene Cooper, "Boko Haram and ISIS Are Collaborating More, U.S. Military Says," *New York Times*, April 20, 2016.

¹⁴ Mercy Corps, *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth*, April 2016.

- **Weak representation**

In the Middle Belt, minority communities that migrated into the area centuries ago in search of economic opportunities now are discriminated against and face enormous challenges accessing resources and influencing decision-making. The principle of “indigenization” -- the idea derived from an interpretation of the 1999 constitution that certain economic and political rights belong solely to the original inhabitants of an area -- has created yet another barrier to the rights of certain communities to own property in the communities in which they live or access public universities at low costs or run for public office. This has exacerbated intercommunal competition and conflicts in a number of Nigerian states.

- **Marginalization of women and youth**

Women and youth constitute the highest demographic blocks in Northern Nigeria, yet they are also the most marginalized. For example, in the North East geopolitical zone, 61 percent of all women and girls are illiterate -- the highest rate in the country.¹⁵ Women in Northern Nigeria are also disproportionately disengaged from the political process. Northern Nigeria only allowed full women's suffrage in 1979 -- 19 years after Nigeria gained independence and granted women the right to vote.¹⁶

Youth have limited access to education and economic opportunities. At 48.9 percent, Northern Nigeria has the lowest youth literacy rates in the country, far below the national average of 80 percent.¹⁷ Also, of Nigeria's 10.5 million children of primary school-age that are out of school, 60 percent live in northern states.¹⁸ Some of these children attend Quranic schools that do not necessarily meet the standards of Nigeria's national education curriculum.¹⁹ These youth will have even fewer opportunities for higher education and gainful employment, and thus, could be more vulnerable to recruitment into extremist movements.

Boko Haram has recruited women and youth, sometimes forcibly through kidnappings and coercion. In the Mercy Corp study referenced above, many former combatants stated that a leading motivation for joining the group was the belief that Boko Haram would provide loans to start or expand business opportunities.²⁰

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *They Set the Classrooms On Fire*, April 11, 2016.

¹⁶ Mohamed M. Wader, Tanko Yusuf Dahiru and Mukhtar Imam, “The Myth and Reality of Women's Political Marginalization In Nigeria,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, December 2015.

¹⁷ International Growth Center, “Investing in Nigeria's Youth Bulge,” October 22, 2014.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, *They Set the Classrooms on Fire*, April 11, 2016.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mercy Corps, *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth*, April 2016.

III. The Way Forward

To its credit, the Buhari government has made a commitment to tackle these challenges. In his inaugural address, President Buhari clearly identified the fight against corruption and insecurity, and the reviving of the Nigerian economy as the main priorities for his administration. On the security front, he reassigned the Military Command and Control Centre base to Maiduguri in Borno state, the epicenter of the Boko Haram crisis. He also replaced the military's top leadership or service chiefs and has strengthened intelligence-sharing and coordination with the neighboring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger. This strategic shift has facilitated the creation of the Multinational Joint Task Force.

On the other hand, the government has been slower in responding to the increasing violence in the Middle Belt, fueled by the crisis between agrarian and pastoralist communities, even as situation has escalated in recent months. Only in April did President Buhari finally state that stopping the violence is a priority and ordered the police and military to “take all necessary action to stop the carnage.”²¹

The Buhari government has also implemented several humanitarian interventions to provide immediate assistance to communities in Northern Nigeria. The National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA) is providing food and other basic assistance to IDPs in camps, although less than 10 percent of IDPs live in camps.²²

In January 2016, President Buhari created a Presidential Committee on North East Initiatives tasked with overseeing humanitarian responses and long-term development planning and coordinating initiatives such as the Safe Schools Initiative and the Victims Support Fund. The Presidential Committee has received support, grants and donations from governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations and philanthropists.

Earlier this year, some members of the Nigerian National Assembly introduced a bill to create the North East Development Commission (NEDC), similar to the body instituted almost two decades ago to address underdevelopment and conflict in the Niger Delta region. It is projected that should the bill become law, the NEDC would develop policies and guidelines for the development of the North East, and implement sustainable development programs across all sectors in the region.

²¹ Premium Times, “Buhari Breaks Silence, Orders ‘Herdsman’ Brought to Justice,” April 27, 2016.

²² Refugees International, *Nigeria's Displaced Women and Girls: Humanitarian Community at Odds, Boko Haram Survivors Forsaken*, April 21, 2016.

With Boko Haram possibly in its last throes after recent battlefield successes by the Nigerian and regional militaries and as Nigeria and its development partners reflect on concrete measures to revive and rehabilitate the North East zone, urgent steps should be taken to address the underlying grievances and deprivations that triggered or fueled the above-referenced crises.

- **Expedite the creation of a comprehensive development agency for North East Nigeria** - The government of Nigeria should expedite the creation of the NEDC in order to better coordinate the mobilization and allocation of resources to rebuilding and rehabilitating broken and desperate homes in the North East.
- **Prioritize long-term economic development** - Nigeria should prioritize economic recovery programs that can improve livelihoods and facilitate investments in sectors such as agriculture, mining and infrastructural development that can lay the foundations for sustainable long-term economic growth and development.
- **Review the legal framework on indigenization and land access** - The Nigerian Federal government and lawmakers should consider amendments to the Grazing Reserve Law of 1965 that would establish formal grazing routes. Representatives of agrarian and pastoralist communities should be included in conversations on new approaches to land use planning. Similarly, Nigeria would need to review its indigenization policy in order to foster harmonious co-existence among communities and avenues for equal access to effective participation in politics, governance and economic opportunity for all its citizens irrespective of their state or local government area (LGA) of birth and/or residence.
- **Introduce stronger, citizen-centered approaches to state and local governance** - State and local government institutions should be strengthened and should be adequately resourced to better respond to the needs of citizens and deliver critical public services such as healthcare and education at the grassroots level in the communities that need them the most.
- **Further professionalization of security services** - Nigeria should design and implement holistic counterinsurgency strategies that include components of community policing and demobilization and rehabilitation of former combatants in the North East. Similarly, in the Middle Belt, security responses should focus on policing and dismantling of criminal networks, and creating mediation and conflict prevention committees at the state and LGA levels. Nigeria's security forces must ensure their actions do not come at the expense of human rights and the rule of law.
- **Strengthen and diversify regional cooperation into the economic and development sphere** - Although Boko Haram was a Nigerian problem at inception, it has morphed into a sub-regional security threat for countries in the Lake Chad basin, taking advantage of

porous borders and fluid migration patterns of population groups along national borders. As combating Boko Haram has required a coordinated multi-national approach involving intelligence sharing, joint cross-border operations and continued capacity support to security services from Cameroon, Chad and Niger through the Multinational Joint Task Force, so should addressing the humanitarian crisis require economic and infrastructural development that integrates the socio-economic interests of these neighboring countries.

- **Support rehabilitation and resiliency of impacted communities and individuals** - Resources should be allocated for the rehabilitation of former combatants and victims of Boko Haram or other forms of violence as well as communities impacted by these heinous attacks. These efforts should also include sustained mental health programs to address the long lasting effects of trauma and youth radicalization by extremist groups and other negative forces.
- **Promote women and youth as agents of peace** - More women and youth should be included in rehabilitation and peacebuilding and recovery processes to render these processes more inclusive, effective and sustainable. Specific funding mechanisms should be dedicated to supporting young and female entrepreneurs so as to boost employment and livelihoods and also elevate the roles of youth and women in society, thereby empowering them with greater access to decision-making.
- **Enhance educational opportunities, particularly for girls** - A recent New York Times column noted, “The greatest threat to extremism isn’t drones firing missiles, but girls reading books.”²³ Closing the education gap in Northern Nigeria, particularly for girls, will improve the region’s long-term development and also reduce the foothold of future extremist groups like Boko Haram.
- **Promote dialogue between agrarian and pastoralist communities** - Formalize regular and inclusive dialogue among contiguous communities in order to build mutual understanding and facilitate early detection and prevention or resolution of conflicts. Create new or strengthen existing alternative dispute resolution mechanisms to handle conflicts as they emerge and before they devolve into violence. Such intercommunal dialogue at the LGA and state levels could identify areas of common interest and opportunities for potential mutual economic benefit.

Despite these challenges, the country of Nigeria has, in the past, proven its resilience. By using its public resources wisely and improving governance at the local, state and federal levels, the leaders of Africa’s largest economy and most populous country can still deliver on the promises

²³ Nicholas Kristof, “What’s So Scary About Smart Girls?,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2014.

of democracy and the dividends that many Nigerians expect of their government, especially in the northern regions of the country. More inclusive and responsive governance, especially at the local level, would help sustain for the long term the military gains against Boko Haram and ongoing efforts to tackle terrorism and skirmishes that impact negatively on citizens' wellbeing and undermine national cohesion.

Since the peaceful and credible elections of state and national leaders in Nigeria in March 2015, the international community has more forcefully expressed its appreciation of Nigerian efforts to tackle forthrightly corruption, insecurity and economic development. The international community should redouble its support through greater and more robust partnerships with Nigerians at the sub-national levels, directly in the northern states and Local Government Areas most impacted by terrorist-related and/or intercommunal violence. Direct assistance to locally-based institutions and social, citizen-led initiatives would likely have greater impact and prospect to be sustainable over the long term. In addition to security and other forms of material assistance, the international community should prioritize human development expertise that can address the trauma that the violence of the last few years has inflicted on youth, women, girls and other underprivileged segments of society.

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