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DEAN, NEW JERSEY DELEGATION

“Nigeria on the Brink?”

U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
Chairman’s opening remarks at hearing
January 27, 2015

“Nigeria is Africa’s most populous nation and is the continent’s largest economy. Unfortunately, Nigeria is beset by various challenges that threaten the peace and stability of this African giant. The terrorist group Boko Haram continues its bloody reign of terror, now threatening to establish a “caliphate” on the model of ISIS in the Levant. Religious and ethnic discord, which pre-dates Boko Haram’s emergence, continues unabated. Lower oil prices have seriously damaged an economy significantly dependent on oil revenues. Meanwhile, the prospect of a violent repeat of the 2011 post-election scene has ratcheted up tensions in Nigeria even further. Today’s hearing will examine the situation in Nigeria and the U.S. effort to maintain positive relations with the largest U.S. trading partner in Africa and a major ally in international peacekeeping.

“U.S.-Nigeria relations were understandably rocky during the military rule of Sani Abacha in the 1990s. However, the advent of democracy with the 1999 elections ushered in an improved atmosphere of cooperation. Nigeria consistently ranks among the top recipients of U.S. bilateral foreign assistance and is the second-largest beneficiary of U.S. investment in Africa. In recent months, though, our relations have deteriorated. Apparently, some in the government of President Goodluck Jonathan feel the United States is meddling in their internal affairs, especially when it comes to our noting deprivation of the due process rights of citizens by Nigerian military and security forces. Our view is that friends don’t just stand by when friends commit human rights abuses.

“Our subcommittee held a hearing last July 10th to examine the complaints that human rights vetting was a major obstacle to U.S. counter-terrorism. What we found was that the State Department estimated that half of Nigerian forces would pass our vetting process, which we found is slowed by too few staff working on these important issues. Still, the Nigerian government must be more cooperative. Some units in larger divisions may have human rights issues, but if replaced by units without such baggage, there would be created an entirely acceptable division for training. Late last year, the Nigerian government cancelled the counter-terrorism training of one of its battalions, which now places the entire training program on hold. We are making arrangements for discussions in the near future with Nigerian military officials and members of Congress and the Obama Administration to overcome the current stalemate and resume the cooperation necessary to meet the challenge posed by Boko Haram.

“This terrorist group has wreaked havoc on the people of Nigeria, particularly in the northeast. It is estimated that more than 5,500 people were killed in Boko Haram attacks last year

alone, representing more than 60% of the more than 9,000 deaths caused by this group in the past five years. As many as 2,000 people may have perished in the Boko Haram attack on the town of Baga and nearby villages earlier this month. More than a million Nigerians have been displaced internally by the violence, and tens of thousands of others are now refugees in neighboring countries. Clearly, Boko Haram violence is escalating drastically.

“Boko Haram has become part of the global jihadist movement and threatens not only Nigeria, but also Cameroon, Chad and Niger. While the terrorist group may not be an official affiliate of al-Qaeda or ISIS, they appear to be trying to create an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria. Various press reports estimate that the group has seized as much as 70% of Borno state, with additional territory under its control in neighboring Yobe and Adamawa states. In fact, Reuters calculated that by mid-January of this year, Boko Haram was in control of more than 30,000 square kilometers of territory – an area the size of the state of Maryland.

“For approximately two years, I pressed the Administration to designate Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist organization (FTO). I argued that, like cancer, early intervention can mitigate its spread, severity and duration. I traveled to Nigeria twice and convened three hearings during the last Congress on why an FTO designation might help, only to be told by then-Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson that “the phenomenon of Boko Haram is one of discrediting the Central Government in power for its failure to deliver services to people.”

“On the very day of our hearing to consider a bill on FTO designation, the state Department, led by Secretary of State Kerry announced that Boko Haram was being designated a Foreign Terrorist organization.

“Meanwhile, Nigeria faces the prospects of post-election violence after presidential voting on February 14th. The race pits President Jonathan against former Nigerian military ruler General Muhammadu Buhari in a re-run of the 2011 elections. This time, however, Buhari’s All Progressive Congress (APC) is a coalition of major opposition political parties and includes defectors from President Jonathan’s People’s Democratic Party (PDP), such as Speaker of the National Assembly Aminu Tambuwal.

“Some PDP officials have referred to their opponents as “Nigeria’s Muslim Brotherhood,” while APC officials accuse the Jonathan Administration of representing only Christian southerners. Party spokesmen on both sides have warned of potential violence if their candidate doesn’t win. Out of nearly 69 million registered voters in Nigeria, political observers believe this race could be decided by as few as 700,000 votes. Lack of action by the government to ensure that internally displaced voters can participate in the elections, delays in the distribution of voter cards and in the recruitment and training of poll workers places in question the effectiveness of the February elections.

“Moreover, the election laws require that a winning presidential candidate must achieve a majority of the votes and at least 25% of the vote in two-thirds of the states. With so much territory in the control of Boko Haram or under the threat of their violence in the North, the northern-based APC likely would question a loss even though they have refused to accept a delay in voting to ensure that pre-election preparations are complete.

“According to a recent Gallup poll, only 13% of Nigerians have confidence in the electoral process. This makes the “Quick Count” being planned by a coalition of Nigerian civil society groups vital in providing any confidence that the vote on February 14th reflects the will of the people.

“In the face of all the challenges faced by Nigeria, its allies – such as the United States – must understand fully the context of this situation in order to determine how best to be of help. We hope that the Nigerian government resulting from the February elections will be accepting of outside advice and assistance.

“Nigeria is the proverbial “too big to fail” nation. A collapse of its economy, increase in refugees to its neighbors or spread of its homegrown terrorism to the region and the broader

international community clearly will be problematic for more than just Nigeria. Religious extremism already is a problem elsewhere in the Sahel region. Last week, Muslim extremists destroyed more than 40 Christian churches in Niger because of what they felt was irreverent depictions of the prophet Mohammed – not in Niger but in Europe.

“Today’s hearing is just the beginning of our renewed efforts to help Nigeria address the problems that threaten its stability. We must be honest with Nigerians and ourselves about the difficulties we both face. This is why we have asked our witnesses to give their honest assessments of where we are in the various situations Nigeria encounters and to suggest what actions our government can and should take to be most helpful. It is in our mutual interest to do so, and therefore, we will continue our efforts to restore full military and security cooperation between our two countries.”