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

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

Excerpts of remarks

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Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with more than 180 million people, roughly divided between Muslims and Christians and including numerous ethnic groups. Nigeria's Muslim population is among the largest in the world and has likely overtaken Egypt's as the largest on the continent. Lagos, its commercial center, is among the world's largest cities. Nigeria also is Africa's largest economy and largest oil producer.

Nigeria has long been a top troop contributor to U.N. peacekeeping operations and is a major political force on the continent. Consequently, Africa and the international community consider Nigeria's stability to be a paramount concern. Unfortunately, that stability has been under increasing threat in recent years.

Disgruntled elements of the mostly Muslim Kanuri ethnic group in 2003 created Boko Haram, a violent Islamist extremist group based in the northeast. Boko Haram is considered the deadliest terrorist group in the world -- responsible for 6,664 deaths last year alone. Neglect of the region has limited potential support of Kanuris and other ethnic groups for government efforts to combat the terror threats in Northern Nigeria.

Elsewhere in Northern Nigeria, Fulani herdsmen have clashed with a multi-ethnic group of farmers, leaving 3,000 people dead since 2010. Meanwhile, the growing number of confrontational Shiites in northern Nigeria recently resulted in a December 2015 massacre in Zaria in Kaduna State in which an as-yet-undetermined number of civilians and military were killed. The number of dead is believed to be in the hundreds, but there are several ongoing investigations of this incident.

This subcommittee has held several hearings on various aspects of Nigeria's situation, including specifically terrorist attacks by Boko Haram. Staff Director Greg Simpkins and I have visited Abuja and Jos several times. Jos is a city where numerous churches were fire-bombed by Boko Haram.

Today's hearing will examine the ongoing fight against that terrorist group and other conflicts in northern Nigeria in an effort to determine the best way for the U.S. government to help address these challenges in the context of our overall Nigeria policy.

The Nigerian government has struggled to respond to the continuing threat posed by Boko Haram. U.S. officials have expressed continuing concern about Boko Haram's impact in Nigeria and neighboring countries and its ties with other extremist groups, notably the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, to which Boko Haram pledged allegiance in 2015. The recruitment of Nigerians by other transnational terrorist groups also has been a concern.

The State Department designated Boko Haram and a splinter faction, Ansaru, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in November 2013, following sustained effort by this subcommittee.

The U.S. government has made an effort to support Nigeria's battle against Boko Haram, but our counterterrorism training was suspended by the previous Nigerian government. It has been resumed, and is much needed. Boko Haram commenced a territorial offensive in mid-2014 that Nigerian forces struggled to reverse until early 2015, when regional military forces, primarily from neighboring Chad, launched an offensive against the group. The Nigerian army has since reclaimed most of the territory, although many areas remain insecure.

One of our witnesses today, Emmanuel Ogebe, recently told of his meeting with a Christian woman named Saratu in a refugee camp in northeast Nigeria. "She had just returned from searching for her 4 missing children – ages 14, 11, 8 and 7 – who had been abducted by Boko Haram from an attack on her town in 2014," he recounted. "She traveled to the front lines asking soldiers if they saw her kids. She went to IDP camps. This is the life of many today in northern Nigeria."

We recently commemorated the two-year anniversary of the kidnapping of nearly 300 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in northeastern Nigeria. We have with us today Sa'a, one of the girls who escaped this mass kidnapping, but many of her classmates were not so fortunate. Many of these schoolgirls are believed to have been forced to convert to Islam and married to Boko Haram fighters or prostituted by this group. We now receive reports that some of them may be used as suicide bombers.

As if the menace posed by Boko Haram was not enough of a challenge for the government of President Mohammedu Buhari, there is the growing crisis in Nigeria's Middle Belt, largely caused by clashes between Fulani herdsmen and a multi-ethnic group of farmers. Some of the violence is a result of conflicts over cattle rustling on encroachment on private lands. Nevertheless, according to the current Global Terrorism Index, Fulani militants operating in Nigeria and Central African Republic are considered the fourth deadliest militant group in Africa behind Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb and al-Shabaab.

More recently, a new threat has been added to the volatile northern region. Although the majority of Nigerian Muslims are Sunni, there are between 1 and 3 million Shia concentrated in Kano, Nassarawa, and Kaduna states. Members of a recent staff delegation that visited Kaduna found a high level of concern by Sunni Muslim leaders about what they described as an assertive Shia presence reportedly supported by Iran.

Since the 1980s, the Shiite Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) has existed as a state within the state. Despite being a professed nonviolent movement, the IMN has made itself a public nuisance, blocking roads on the days they have processions, thus preventing citizens from accessing medical care in a timely fashion. It is for these social and religious reasons why the group is not sympathetic, even in light of what is believed to have occurred last December.

Although the details of what happened in the town of Zaria appear to be murky, the U.S. Embassy believes that Chief of Army Staff Lt.-Gen. Tukur Buratai was attending a graduation ceremony in Zaria during an anticipated IMN religious procession. A Nigerian security force deployed to protect Buratai's route had an altercation with IMN members. Claiming that there was an assassination attempt on Buratai, the Nigerian military opened fire.

The exact number of people killed is not known for certain, and since the Zaria massacre, six separate investigations have been initiated by the military, the Human Rights Commission, Nigerian Bar Association, Senate, House of Representatives, and the Kaduna state government.

The security challenges facing the Nigerian government are complex and not easily resolved. Consequently, any effective assistance our government can provide must be tailored to the various threats facing Nigeria, but cannot succeed without the full cooperation of the Government of Nigeria. Success will depend on more than military training and the transfer of equipment.

Nigeria's federal and state governments must find a way to meet the needs of their people. This may not dissuade extremists from their deadly goals, but it can help diminish the pool of recruits and at least earn the cooperation of the citizens most affected by the horrific attacks in their midst.

Our witnesses today are intimately familiar with the turbulent scene in northern Nigeria and will help us better understand what can be done to meet the threat of terrorism and discord in northern Nigeria.