

CRS Issue Brief for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Nigeria in Political Transition

Updated December 11, 2001

Theodros Dagne
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Current Issues

Historical and Political Background

Transition to Civilian Rule

Elections

Current Economic and Social Conditions

Issues in U.S.-Nigerian Relations

Background

The United States and the Obasanjo Government

CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS, REPORTS, AND DOCUMENTS

FOR ADDITIONAL READING

CRS Reports

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 the Senate elections, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) won 58% of the votes, the All People's Party (APP) 23%, and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) 19%. In the elections for the House of Representatives, PDP received 59% of the votes, AD 22%, and APP 20%.

The international community welcomed the election of Obasanjo as president. The European Union restored full cooperation with Nigeria and lifted sanctions that were imposed to punish the Abacha government. The Commonwealth moved swiftly and readmitted Nigeria as a member, after 3 years of suspension.

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 enhanced trade and commercial development.

In May 2001, President Obasanjo met with President Bush and other senior officials in Washington. 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 early November 2001, President Obasanjo paid a visit to Washington to express his government's support for the U.S.-led anti-terrorism campaign.

Nigeria continues to make progress in strengthening its fragile democracy but faces serious economic challenges. With a population of over 126 million, 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.

Economic conditions remain poor, despite serious efforts by the Obasanjo government. Revenues from oil account for more than 90% of foreign exchange earnings and 65% of budget revenues. Meanwhile, high unemployment rate continues to pose serious challenge to the government.

MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In late November 2001, the Obasanjo government announced that Nigeria has 8.7% of the world's AIDS cases. According to government figures, the number of cases has increased from 2.7 million in 1999 to 3.47 million in 2001. In early December 2001, Nigeria began to distribute cheap generic drugs to people with AIDS/HIV. The government plans to distribute anti-retroviral drugs to an estimated 10,000 patients.

In early November 2001, President Obasanjo met with President Bush in Washington express his government's support for the U.S.-led anti-terrorism campaign. At a press conference, Presidents Bush and Obasanjo pledged to work together. President Bush said that Obasanjo "has been a steadfast friend of the United States government and the United States people, before and after September 11th, and for that we are most grateful." In response, President Obasanjo stated that he came to the United States "to express solidarity, to express support, to express condolences for the terrorist attack on this country, on innocent people of all faiths and of all races on the 11th of September."

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Current Issues

In late May 1999, General Obasanjo was sworn in as president of a new civilian government. In his inaugural address, President Obasanjo said he is prepared to restore confidence in government, deal with the growing economic crisis, and tackle corruption. In late June, the Nigerian Senate approved 42 of the 49 cabinet members submitted for confirmation by President Obasanjo.

In early June 1999, the Commonwealth readmitted Nigeria as member, after 3 years of suspension. The European Union also restored full economic cooperation with Nigeria. In July, a court in Abuja convicted the Speaker of the House of Representatives after he pleaded guilty to perjury and forgery. The Speaker was forced to resign from Nigeria's 469-member national assembly after admitting that he lied about his age and educational qualifications.

In mid-August 1999, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson visited Nigeria and met with senior government officials. In late September, the Associate Administrator of the Federal Airports Administration (FAA), Admiral Cathal Flynn, visited Nigeria to discuss the status of the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos. The United States suspended flights to Lagos because of security concerns. On December 22, 1999, the Department of Transportation removed the suspension after Nigeria met all safety requirements.

In mid-October 1999, 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 late October, Nigeria’s Zamfara state introduced Islamic *Sharia* law. The introduction of *Sharia* law has triggered sharp reaction from non-Muslims in other parts of Nigeria. In early November, the Cross River state passed a non-binding resolution declaring the area a Christian state in protest of Zamfara state’s action.

Between February and May 2000, more than 500 were killed in Kaduna in northern Nigeria in violence triggered by the proposal to introduce *Sharia* by Muslims. The violence was triggered in reaction to a proposal to introduce *Sharia* by Moslems. Following Zamfara State which began implementing *Sharia* in January 2000, the states of Niger and Sokoto adopted *Sharia* in February. As of August 2000, several more states, including Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Yobe, and Borno have adopted *Sharia*. (Details available on the BBC News Web site at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/low/english/world/africa/newsid_924000/924573.stm].) Despite assurances by authorities in these states that *Sharia* would not apply on non-Moslems, Christian groups complain about restrictions as a result of the new law. President Obasanjo vowed to punish the perpetrators of the violence and assured Nigerians that the security services would restore law and order. President Obasanjo stated in late August 2000 that the best way to respond to *Sharia* was to ignore it: “I think *Sharia* will fizzle out. To confront it is to keep it alive.”

In late June, Nigeria and the United States established a new organization to promote trade and investment. The U.S. and Nigeria Trade and Investment Council was inaugurated in late June in the Nigerian capital, Abuja. According to U.S. Deputy Trade Representative Susan Esserman, “the Council shall focus on removing impediments to trade, developing and implementing concrete strategies to strengthen reforms and achieve economic diversification and growth.” In February 2000, Nigeria and the United States signed a trade and investment agreement in Washington.

In mid-May, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) decided to send an estimated 3,000 troops to the war-torn west African country of Sierra Leone. Nigeria was expected to contribute the majority of the 3,000 troops and take command of the West African force in Sierra Leone.

Swiss officials said that about 120 accounts in Zurich and Geneva have been frozen. In early April 2000, Swiss officials charged a businessman for falsifying documents to open a bank account in Geneva for the Abacha family. According to the New York Times, the unidentified businessman is Dharam Vir of New Delhi, India. In mid-May, 2000, President Obasanjo announced that his government has recovered \$200 million public funds looted by

former Nigerian dictator Abacha and his associates. In July, Nigerian authorities announced that Swiss officials have transferred \$64.36 million of the looted money to the Central Bank of Nigeria.

In early April, Secretary of Defense William Cohen met with President Obasanjo in Abuja and reportedly pledged \$10 million to Nigeria in military aid, including an increase in the International Military Education Training (IMET) program.

In a meeting with President Obasanjo in Abuja on August 26, 2000, President Clinton stated that the U.S. 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.” President Clinton also made an unprecedented address before the Nigerian parliament in which he underscored the major issues facing the country today. Among them were democratization and ethnic and religious strife.

In late February 2001, direct flight from Lagos, Nigeria, to New York resumed after several delays. The direct flight to New York is a joint venture between Nigeria Airways and South African Airways. According to Nigerian officials, flight resumption “signifies the further strengthening of relationship between Nigeria, the United States, and South Africa and these relationship have positive political, social, and economic implications.”

In its Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2000, issued in late February, the State Department stated that Nigeria’s “human rights record was poor; although there were some improvements in several areas during the year, serious problems remain. The national police, army, and security forces continued to commit extrajudicial killings and used excessive force to quell civil unrest and ethnic violence, although they did so less frequently than under previous military governments.”

On February 27, 2001, President Obasanjo stated that he would remove all subsidies from petroleum products, as part of an overhaul of the energy sector and would increase subsidies for education, health and water services. President Obasanjo gave a major televised address to the nation in late December 2000, marking the first anniversary of his government. Obasanjo gave an overview of his government’s achievements of the past 12 months and outlined his agenda for the future. The president acknowledged that serious challenges face the country, including growing ethnic and religious clashes. He stated that Nigeria will continue its peacekeeping role in West Africa.

In late April 2001, 47 African leaders met in Abuja, the capital, to discuss the AIDS crisis in Africa. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan called on donor governments to provide at least \$7 billion to combat AIDS in Africa. Former President Bill Clinton, who attended the summit, also urged donor countries to assist in combating AIDS. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was expected to attend the summit, did not go due to conflict in his schedule, according to the State Department.

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 into 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.

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 1, 2001. Patients are expected to pay about \$7 a month. Nigeria’s Health Minister negotiated a \$350,000 deal with Cipla, an Indian pharmaceutical company.

In early September 2001, clashes broke out between Muslims and Christians in the city of Jos in northern Nigeria. An estimated 500 people were killed in the clashes and thousands more were injured. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of civilians have reportedly fled their homes for other locations. President Obasanjo sent the army to restore order.

In mid-September 2001, President Obasanjo strongly condemned the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and expressed his support in combating terrorism. Obasanjo described the attacks as “callous and dastardly.” The Nigerian House of Representatives also condemned the attacks, calling the terrorist action “an act of terrorism against humanity.”

Historical and Political Background

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa with an estimated 107 million people, 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 largely northern and Hausa domination of the military and the Biafran secession movement and civil war fought by the Ibo from 1967 to 1970. Questions persist as to whether or not 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 41 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. Since 1995, Abacha had 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 pressure 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.

Immediately following Abacha’s death, pro-democracy leaders demanded that Abiola be released from prison and be declared the legitimate ruler of Nigeria. To mark the fifth anniversary of the annulled elections, many dissidents protested and demanded the release of Abiola in spite of a ban on demonstrations by the government. Reports of secret talks between top government officials and Abiola led many observers to believe that the government intended to release Abiola on the condition that he renounce his claim to the

presidency. Government officials granted U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan an audience with Abiola in which Annan reportedly attempted to persuade Abiola to give up his title in order to earn immediate release. Annan reported that Abiola had agreed to renounce his title and cooperate with the transition program, and the government promised to release all political prisoners, including Abiola. However, a letter reportedly written by Abiola and published after his death called into question the accuracy of Annan's report. According to Abiola, Annan behaved like a "Nigerian diplomat" who wanted him to relinquish the title for which he and his supporters had fought over the past 5 years.

During a meeting with a U.S. delegation led by 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: 126.6 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: \$117 billion (2000)
GDP Per Capita: \$950 (2000)
Unemployment rate: 28% (1992)
Exports: \$22.2 billion (1999)
Imports: \$10.7 billion (1999)
External Debt: \$32 billion (1999)

Source: The World Fact book, 2001

Abubakar replaced several of Abacha's top advisors in the military hierarchy with men of his own choosing, and began to establish a framework for the transition to civilian rule. On July 20, 1998, General Abubakar admitted that the October 1998 hand-over date established by Abacha was unrealistic in light of the disruption caused by his death. He announced in a public speech a series of political and economic reforms that his government would implement before handing over power to an elected civilian government on the new official date of May 29, 1999. In an early effort to demonstrate his government's commitment to reconciliation, General Abubakar announced the release of all political detainees and decided to "withdraw all charges against political offenders."

Although politicians and leading opposition figures have generally welcomed the transition program, many were disappointed that Abubakar rejected their call for a national unity government. The leader of the National Democratic Coalition of Nigeria (NADECO), a leading opposition group, proposed a sovereign conference to decide how the different ethnic groups should be represented to draft a constitution for the nation as a whole, at which point elections would be held. Abubakar rejected this suggestion, saying that it replaces one unelected government with another, that the process would take too long, and that "such an arrangement is full of pitfalls and dangers, which this administration cannot accept."

In August and September, 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. Journalists reported that freedom of the press improved during Abubakar's tenure. 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 collate 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 are 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 must 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 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 tribes and ethnicities.

Abubakar announced in a public speech on October 1 that the election commission had already met delegates from the United Nations and the Commonwealth to discuss ways of ensuring free and fair elections in February. Registration of an expected 60 million voters began in early October and lasted until October 19. Despite television advertisements taken out by the INEC and assurances that the lists of voters were checked and cross-checked in order to prevent any faults or double registration, the process was reportedly marked by fraud and controversy. INEC members cited unconfirmed reports that their officials were being bribed to hand over piles of cards to representatives from political parties, in order to improve their chances in the upcoming elections (BBC, October 14, 1998). These accounts were in addition to complaints of shortages of cards in certain areas and that the registration offices were not open at regular hours in certain states. Although the INEC had denied responsibility, political parties and leaders accused the commission of poor preparation and ineptitude.

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 has 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%.

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

Highlights of Abubakar's Transition Program

Rejected:

National Conference
National Unity Government

Accomplished:

Debt relief talks with World Bank and IMF
Release of all political prisoners
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

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.”

Current Economic and Social Conditions

Western officials believe that Sani Abacha may have stolen over \$3.5 billion over the course of his 5 years in power. Abacha’s former national security adviser, Ismaila Gwarzo, has been connected to the disappearance of \$2.45 billion from the Nigerian Central Bank. Due in large part to large-scale theft from the Nigerian Treasury, the education system is collapsing, industry has idled, refineries are in poor conditions, and the sixth-largest oil-producing country in the world suffers from severe fuel shortages. The Nigerian economy depends heavily on oil revenues; about 20% of Nigeria’s GDP comes from petroleum and petroleum products, which also represent 95% of its foreign exchange earnings and 65% of its budgetary revenues (*CIA World Factbook, 2001*). 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. Oil prices are currently low and expected to drop further, which could lead to even more severe consequences for the Nigerian economy.

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 July, though the largest single toll from an explosion was approximately 1,000 in October of 1999. These explosions result from the siphoning off of oil from holes punched in the above-ground pipeline. 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 have stopped 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.

As part of his reforms, Abubakar launched a long-promised privatization program and he also implemented measures to ease the fuel shortage, increasing the number of firms importing oil and beginning repairs on state-owned refineries. Money owed to oil companies was paid under Abubakar, and he gave contracts for new oil imports to established firms, not presidential acquaintances. The pay for civil servants was also increased in an effort to lower the high level of corruption present in all levels of government, and Abubakar ordered open bidding for all government contracts. Abubakar also recovered money stolen and misappropriated during the Abacha regime. The Abacha family had reportedly surrendered \$750 million to the government and former national security adviser Ismaila Gwarzo turned over more than \$250 million. To recover funds, the military junta used quiet pressure rather than the threat of imprisonment. Observers reported that Abubakar was concerned about initiating too broad an inquiry, since an investigation could implicate almost the entire army hierarchy and spark another coup (*Associated Press, November 1, 1998*).

Issues in U.S.-Nigerian Relations

Background

Relations between the United States and Nigeria began to deteriorate with the annulment of the 1993 elections by the military junta. Three issues dominated U.S.-Nigerian relations: 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, but 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 has emerged as a major issue in U.S.-Nigerian relations since 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 remain "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 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 favor dialogue with the Nigerian government. Pro-Nigerian groups and some American business interests actively opposed the bill (*The Washington Post*, November 24, 1996). The Nigerian Democracy Act, introduced by Representative Donald Payne and Representative Amo Houghton in 1997 (to be discussed below), 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 105th 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.

The United States and the Obasanjo Government

Relations between Washington and Abuja began to improve shortly after General Abubakar assumed power. 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.”¹ 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

¹ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1998.

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 into 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.

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

Program	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
DA	4.300	22.80	5.893	6.520	1.670	4.100	3.500	10	10.500	32.833
CSD	--	--	--	--	--	--	3.500	6.8	17.000	22.167
ESF	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	6.9	20.000	25.000
FMF Grants	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	10.000	--
P. Corps	.742	.872	1.047	.429	--	--	--	--	--	--
IMET	.401	.450	--	--	--	--	--	.090	.600	.650
Total	5.443	24.12	6.940	6.949	1.670	4.100	7.000	23.80	58.100	80.650

DA=Development Assistance

CSD=Child Survival and Disease Programs Fund

ESF=Economic Support Fund

P. Corps=Peace Corps

IMET=International Military Education and Training

CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS, REPORTS, AND DOCUMENTS

Testimony by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice before the House Committee on International Relations. "Prospects for Democracy in Nigeria." June 25, 1998.

U.S. Congress. House. Committee on International Relations. Subcommittee on Africa. *United States Policy Toward Nigeria*. Hearing, 105th Congress, 1st session. September 18, 1997. Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997. 35 pp.

FOR ADDITIONAL READING

For an extensive list of Internet resources on Nigeria, including news on politics, the economy, and the culture, see [<http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/nigeria.html>].

Boustany, Nora. "Quiet Confidence in Nigeria's Future." *The Washington Post*. November 11, 1998. A30 p.

Onishi, Norimitsu. "Hopeful but Skeptical, Nigerians Await Democracy." *The New York Times*. November 9, 1998. A3 p.

Rupert, James. "Denied Wealth, Nigeria's Poor Take Dire Steps." *The Washington Post*. November 6, 1998. A17 p.

U.S. Department of State Press Statement. "End to Special Visa Restrictions on Certain Nigerian Nationals." October 30, 1998.

CRS Reports

CRS Report 98-484. *Nigeria: A Chronology, June 1996 - March 1998*, by Theodros Dagne.

CRS Report 98-651. *Nigeria in Political Transition and U.S. Policy*, by Theodros Dagne, with the assistance of Jaimie Morse.