

Press Releases: Briefing on Nigeria

Special Briefing
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MS NAUERT: Thank you so much. Well, good afternoon, everyone, and thanks for joining us today for the call on Nigeria. We're joined by Nathan Holt, the deputy director of the Office of West African Affairs in the Bureau of African Affairs. Thank you, sir, for joining us.

As a reminder, today's call is on the record and it will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. And with that, I'll turn it over to our speaker, Deputy Assistant Secretary Murphy.

MR HOLT: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Excuse me, Holt. (Laughter.) Pardon me.

MR HOLT: Murphy is a fine name. Thank you very much, Heather, and it's a pleasure to be here. The title of our discussion is Nigeria, a critical U.S. partner. Nigeria is indeed a critical U.S. partner. Nigeria matters to us because it's Africa's most populous country, and depending on the price of oil, it's either the biggest or the second biggest economy on the continent. With a current population of 182 million, Nigeria is projected to grow to over 400 million over the next few decades, which will leave it by the middle of this century as the fourth-largest country in the world. About half the population is Muslim. Nigeria has influence, as many of you know, not only as an economic power, as a military power. It's got a vibrant emerging, entrepreneurial class which is the future of that country's economy. It has also got a vibrant film and music industry which has influence well beyond its borders. And I'd like to point out it has traditions of democracy and free press and religious tolerance, all of which contribute to its resilience and its strength.

In 2015, Nigeria had a very important election. It elected Muhammadu Buhari as president. This represented the first time in Nigerian history that there was a peaceful, democratic transfer of power from one party to an opposition party. It was a milestone not only for Nigeria, but really for Africa as a whole. President Buhari's electoral platform was that he wanted to fight

insecurity, particularly the depredations of Boko Haram and other forces in the northeast. He wanted to grow the Nigerian economy, create jobs for its growing population, and he wanted to fight corruption.

Well, the nice thing about that agenda is that it meshes very well with our own. That is – those are areas of focus that very much are consistent with U.S. interests in Nigeria. We too want to partner with Nigeria and its neighbors to fight terrorism. We too support private-sector-led economic growth. And we are very much in favor of President Buhari's campaign against corruption. With that as kind of an overview, I'd like to open it up to questions.

MS NAUERT: Okay, let's take the first question, please.

OPERATOR: And once again, to ask a question, please press * then 1 on your touchtone phone at this time. The question and answer session is open. Once again, to ask a question, please press * then 1 at this time.

MR HOLT: As we wait – as we wait for further questions, a couple of additional points to make to sort of frame the conversation and set a little bit of the context. Nigeria is a very important place for us and it faces enormous obstacles, enormous challenges moving forward. I don't want to give the impression that any of this is going to be easy. In fact, one of our ways of approaching this country is to point at that perhaps nowhere else on the continent, and maybe few places on the planet, is the gap between the upside potential and the downside risk greater. The future of Nigeria matters not just for Nigeria, but very much for its neighbors and I would argue for this planet. The good news is that on issue after issue, we've gone from a place where we were often not on the same page with Nigeria to a place where we see things very much in the same terms.

Some folks may be aware of the humanitarian situation in northeastern Nigeria and its neighboring countries in the Lake Chad Basin. We are a leading donor of humanitarian assistance there, as the countries involved struggle to deal with a food crisis, which is itself a consequence of the Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa insurgency. Many of you will have also followed the news of the release of the Chibok girls over the weekend. Obviously, that was a heartwarming and positive development for the young women involved and for their families. We'd like to point out that they're among thousands of victims of Boko Haram and its offshoot, ISIS West Africa.

We are engaged with Nigeria and its neighbors not only to provide humanitarian relief to the victims of this insurgency, but to help them as security partners and as intelligence partners to address the security dimensions of this problem and to get at some of the drivers of insecurity. Because at the end of the day, I think we and our partners all recognize there's no purely military solution. The end of the day, the hopes and aspirations of the people need to met; education and water and basic governance needs to be provided in areas where it has not been provided before. And it's a joint effort. There are no easy solutions, but we're in this for the long haul.

That's a little bit of additional context. I'd like to point out that United States has worked closely with Nigeria. We provide a range of assistance to Nigerian authorities in their efforts to combat Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa. That includes intelligence sharing, training, advice on strategic communications, and various services to support victims of Boko Haram. And as I said, we've provided close to \$500 million in humanitarian assistance over the last two years to those affected by the conflict in northeastern Nigeria and its neighbors – neighboring countries of Cameroon, Niger, and Chad.

Again, that's an overview of where we are in a very important bilateral relationship for us. I'd like to point out as well that we've worked together closely in the United Nations. We've worked together on issues of arms proliferation, nuclear questions. So Nigeria has a voice in Africa that is quite influential. And I've worked on Africa for most of my professional career, and it's very good to be in a good place with this group.

One of the critical consequences of the Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa insurgency, which has been going on since 2009, is that it has produced terrible, terrible consequences for the population. As the militaries have begun to coordinate their activities more effectively, they and other not just military authorities but civilian authorities have gained access to areas previously under the control of Boko Haram. And as that happens, we have all come to understand more clearly the true dimensions of the humanitarian crisis.

So the United Nations has pointed out that there are more people facing famine-like conditions in northeastern Nigeria and in neighboring regions. We're working as hard as we can and as fast as we can to deliver food assistance and other support to those people. I've quoted the numbers on our own humanitarian assistance a couple of times. I think I would add that just on April 28th the United States announced an additional \$30 million to support the people of northeast Nigeria through contributions to the World Food Program. The World Food Program, I would add, has expanded the numbers of people it is feeding by tenfold over the last two to three months. So the numbers have gone from roughly 200,000 to close to 2 million. The World Food Program needs additional assistance; we're working with other donors and partners to get that assistance to them. It's a collective effort, and none of it's going to get fixed until the insurgency is defeated and the specter of terrorist violence is eliminated from that area.

I believe there are people online for questions, and I'm happy to answer.

MS NAUERT: And with that – thank you, sir. With that, we'll take our first question, please.

OPERATOR: Then we go to Matthew Lee with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, hi. Thanks for this. I realize you probably won't be able to give an exact answer on this, but with all the discussions about cuts coming to foreign aid, cuts coming to U.S. assistance, U.S. payments to UN programs. Are you able to commit to the continued – continued robust U.S. assistance to

Nigeria and other countries in West Africa?

MR HOLT: We're, again, very – we are very pleased that we are the lead humanitarian donor in the Lake Chad Basin region. We've got a vigorous bilateral development assistance program that's dominated by health assistance, including the PEPFAR program, which has really helped turn back the tide of HIV/AIDS not just in Nigeria but across the African continent.

You're absolutely right, Matt; I'm not the person who can answer your questions about the future of the U.S. Government budget. We follow that process with great interest. But for now, the focus not only here at State but in partner agencies is to deliver the assistance that we do have available smartly and effectively so that it achieves the results that we intend.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to ask a question, please press * then 1 at this time.

There appear to be no further questions at this time.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thank you, everyone, for joining us today, and Nathan Holt, the deputy director of the Office of West African Affairs in the Bureau of African Affairs. Sir, thank you for joining us.

MR HOLT: Thank you, ma'am.

MS NAUERT: Thank you, everyone.

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