

Press Releases: Remarks With Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama at a Press Availability

Press Availability
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Presidential Villa
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MODERATOR: Gentlemen of the press, we are delighted to have hosted the American Secretary of State, Mr. Rex Tillerson, who just left our president a short while ago. Now he is here with our minister of foreign affairs, and they are going to address the press. Here, Mr. Secretary of State and our minister, we have both Nigerian journalists and American journalists. So after your initial remarks, they will then ask questions – two from the American side and then two from the Nigerian side.

So, Mr. Secretary of State, we can proceed with your remarks. Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, good afternoon, and I am so pleased to be back in Nigeria, a place that I have visited many, many times. And I particularly appreciate the time that President Buhari and Foreign Minister Onyeama have given me to discuss our countries' relationship, and importantly the commitments we have and make to one another.

We collaborate to create a number of opportunities to increase trade and investment and to expand access to electricity, an essential component of both human and economic development. We also take on a number of challenges across this continent together, from corruption to disease to terrorism. As Africa's largest economy, Nigeria is America's second-largest trading partner on the continent with over \$9 billion in Nigerian-U.S. total goods traded last year.

Later this year, we will inaugurate the U.S.-Nigeria Commercial and Investment Dialogue and a Trade and Investment Framework Council, both very positive steps to develop stronger business networks and address barriers to increasing trade and investment from the United States. We also look forward to the finalization of the Continental Free Trade Agreement through the

African Union as an important mechanism to accelerate intra-African trade, a step which we believe is going to bring even greater foreign direct investment and I know a greater U.S. business investment and involvement in Africa, and most particularly Nigeria with Nigeria's large population and growing economy.

We thank Nigeria for the leadership role it is playing in the Lake Chad Basin Multinational Joint Task Force with Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin. Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa have caused the displacement of millions and stolen the future from so many. The recent kidnapping of more than 100 school girls is heartbreaking. Nigeria has the United States' full support, and we are actively working with our partners here on other ways we can assist you in this fight.

Finally, I shared with the president the United States optimism about the future of democratic governance here and throughout the continent. Nigeria's elections and peaceful transfer of power in 2015 demonstrated for the rest of Africa and the world that diverse societies can conduct peaceful, democratic transitions of leadership. The United States looks forward to joining with government and civil society groups in support of transparent, credible, fair, and peaceful elections once again here in Nigeria.

The United States also commends Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts. President Buhari's work has resonated across the continent with his recent recognition as the African Union's anti-corruption champion. We continue to encourage the Nigerian Government to work with civic and community leaders to create a durable social, economic, and political infrastructure that supports lasting peace and development for the decades to come. This is essential to deepening the people's trust in their government, strengthening security efforts in the northeast, and improving the United States' ability to partner with Nigeria in the future. We see nothing but a very bright future ahead for Nigeria and for U.S.-Nigerian relations. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Honorable Minister for Foreign Affairs.

FOREIGN MINISTER ONYEAMA: Well, first of all, we'd like to thank Secretary Tillerson for coming to Nigeria, and especially, as you know, he was slightly under the weather during his last – his trip to the last country he visited. So it was really quite a great effort for him to be here, and we're very appreciative of that.

His visit here clearly shows the level of the relationship between the two countries. The two presidents have an excellent personal relationship, and that has transmitted down through the U.S. Government and the Nigerian Government. And during their meeting they talked about a number of things.

With regards to the economy, the Secretary recognized the size and the importance of Nigeria economically in Africa, and they appreciated, together with Mr. President, the importance of U.S. investment in Nigeria. And Mr. President pointed out that there are a large number of U.S. companies investing in Nigeria. The Secretary pointed out that Nigeria was the second-largest trading partner of the United States in Africa, and they both

recognized the need and the possibilities of increasing that level of trade. And as you know, Mr. President is – has set up a commission, a committee chaired by the vice president, on the enabling business environment council.

So as a government, the need and the objective is there to make Nigeria an attractive place to do business, and we look forward very much to the United States as such an important trading partner being involved economically and trade-wise with the country. And of course, as the Secretary has just reiterated, he also mentioned that the Continental Free Trade Area treaty is about to be signed in Kigali, Rwanda in the framework of the African Union to promote greater intra-African trade, and the U.S. supports that very much. And this is a treaty that will probably signed early next week.

With regards to governance, again, Mr. Secretary recognized that our president is so highly regarded in the area of good governance, especially anti-corruption. And as you all know, he is a champion of the African Union theme for this year on anti-corruption, and this was acknowledged and recognized by the Secretary.

And in this context, it talked about the elections, our elections next year, and the importance of maintaining the peaceful trajectory that we have. He pointed out that Nigeria, such a large country, was an excellent model for the rest of Africa, having held three years ago already peaceful and transparent elections, and the U.S. will do everything in their power to support that process and keeping the peace and the good governance throughout.

And on the security question, Mr. President thanked the Secretary for the support that Nigeria is receiving from the United States in our various challenges and battles with terrorism. And in particular, as you know, the United States has agreed to sell to Nigeria the A29 Super Tucano aircraft, which our aircraft and military believe will be a game changer. It will take some time before we get delivery, but hopefully they might somehow fast-track the production of these aircrafts for us.

And of course, Mr. Secretary talked about the importance of cooperating with all the various countries in fighting this asymmetric war against terrorism; but he also pointed out – and Mr. President, of course, has been saying that for a very long time – that the real battle will be in providing the economic environment for those who might otherwise be influenced by violent extremist ideology, and the importance of education. But there again, the – Mr. Secretary pointed out that the U.S. was really there, ready to support Nigeria going forward in – economically, socially, culturally. So it was an excellent meeting that they both had. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Honorable Minister. Question time. The first question is Josh Lederman of AP. Thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. Mr. Foreign Minister, your government has long suggested that the Boko Haram insurgents have been defeated, but the response to the abduction of a hundred girls from Dapchi appears to have been badly mismanaged, taking a week to even acknowledge that the girls were missing.

What went wrong, and do you still assess that insurgency to have been defeated?

And Secretary Tillerson, while we've been here in Africa, Jared Kushner met with the Mexican president without inviting your U.S. ambassador to Mexico. He's trying to broker Mideast peace despite losing his top security clearance, and he's under mountain – mounting scrutiny over widespread reporting that his business ties to the UAE led him to push the administration to side against Qatar in the Gulf crisis. Can you tell us, how is this helping your diplomacy? Thank you.

MODERATOR: Please, go ahead.

FOREIGN MINISTER ONYEAMA: Okay. Well, with regard to the kidnapping of the girls in Dapchi, it would be – it's incorrect, actually, to say that it took a week to acknowledge. It was acknowledged immediately and there was some auditing that was being done, and strategizing. Now, other people might have made comments to the press, but those comments did not represent the government, and no government official came out to indicate that – any lack of acknowledgement of what took place.

Now, fighting terrorism is a new challenge globally. When we talk of having degraded Boko Haram, this government was referring more specifically to the situation that was confronted when the government took over. That was a situation where you had a classical military confrontation and Boko Haram was capturing territory, holding onto territory, and hoisting flags. And so as a conventional military threat, Boko Haram has been completely degraded.

Now, there is a challenge with regards to sporadic suicide bombings and, of course, latterly this kidnapping of the girls. We don't by any stretch of the imagination minimize those, but it's really a different kind of warfare as it is. And the government is sparing no effort in addressing that, but it's a different challenge that requires intelligence and also understanding the environment that breeds this kind of limited support for Boko Haram – the indoctrinization – indoctrination of young children.

So in a nutshell, the answer is it didn't take a week to acknowledge the abduction of these girls, and secondly, of course, it's a global challenge. It's not only in Nigeria, so – the terrorist challenge – and it's something that we are addressing. But as far as military – classical military threat, we've certainly degraded the capacity of Boko Haram to mount a classic military offensive.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: Next question.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, yeah, I think as to – this trip to Africa's been really important for the administration, and that's what I've been focused on for the past week, as you know. I think, with respect to Mr. Kushner's portfolio of assignments that the President has given him, I think it's best to leave any comment on that to himself or the White House.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Next question will come from Ibrahim Adra of Channels Television.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary of State. Ibrahim Adra, Channels Television, and I would like to welcome you on behalf of the state house press corps and hope that this is not your last visit.

Mr. Secretary, like you did mention, one of the side consequences of the Boko Haram insurgency that Nigeria has been fighting to contain is the abduction of secondary school girls in Chibok and of late Dapchi. And we also had just now been told how Mr. President is appreciative of the effort the United States Government, but I'd like to push a little further. In specific terms, in what ways will the United States assist Nigeria in securing these girls from their captors, and how soon?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, first, we respect the responsibilities of the Government of Nigeria. This is sovereign territory of Nigeria. But the way we support is in providing them capability, capacity, whether it's equipment, but also training personnel for special operations, and sharing certain intelligence to ensure that they have all the information available to plan and carry out a recovery effort.

But I think it's also important to put this in the broader regional context as well. Boko Haram is a threat to others regionally, and this has been a subject in my meetings elsewhere while in Africa as well. And in my discussions, in fact, with President Deby in Chad earlier today we spoke about the threat of Boko Haram. And I think what's important and has really been powerful is the collaboration of the joint task force that – of which Nigeria is a part and Chad is a part, to respond to this threat of terrorism, of which Boko Haram is one organization. There are other threats that the leadership in this part of the country has to deal with and this part of the continent has to deal with.

So the United States is very engaged in that coordinated effort as well, both in supporting, equipping, training, and where we can advise and provide information. I think that's the best way we can help the Government of Nigeria secure the release of these girls, which we hope will be done in a peaceful manner. We hope that something that can be worked out and they will be persuaded to release these girls quickly. That's what we're pray, anyway.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Mr. Secretary of State. Next is Nike Ching of the Voice of America.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Mr. Secretary, after President Trump accepted North Korea's invitation for direct talks, North Korea leader Kim Jong-un has not said anything publicly. Have the North Koreans said anything to you privately? How likely do you think it is that the meeting will actually take place, and do you think the two leaders will come to some sort of a deal? And also, where would you suggest the meeting to take place?

Mr. Foreign Minister, if I may, with the recent attacks in Mali, the killing of the U.S. soldiers in Niger and continued (inaudible) in Nigeria by Islamic

militants, why is the war against the – against the militants failing to register any gains? Things seem to be getting worse in spite of the big buildup by the regional states and the West, U.S., France (inaudible). Thank you very much.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: With respect to the ongoing discussions about a potential meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, as you know, it's a very recent development. There will be – several steps will be necessary to agree on a location, agree on a scope of those discussions. It's very early stages. We've not heard anything directly back from North Korea, although we expect to hear something directly from them. So I would – I know those are all questions that people are anxious to have answers to. I would say just remain patient and we'll see what happens.

QUESTION: How about a location?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: That as well. Nothing – nothing's been agreed, and I don't want to start floating ideas out through the media. I think it's going to be very important that those kind of conversations are held quietly between the two parties.

FOREIGN MINISTER ONYEAMA: Regarding whether things are going – are getting worse in the fight against terrorism, I wouldn't necessarily agree that that accurately represents the situation, but there is no doubt that the threat is there. There is no doubt that the damage that they are capable of and are actually inflicting is great. And this explains, of course, why there are so many countries involved and now establishing a presence militarily in this part of the continent.

But it's work in progress, if I can use the word "work" to describe that kind of activity, and it requires a lot of intelligence. And as I said, it's an asymmetric warfare that a lot of the countries in this part of the continent are just not prepared for, and there's a lot of – there's a lot of effort and there's been a lot of success, I mean really very concrete successes that have been achieved.

But clearly, there's a lot that still needs to be done, which is why there are these investments. Why does it appear sometimes that these terrorists are able to – or seem to be getting more emboldened and stronger? We've seen the attack in Burkina Faso and the ones that you've mentioned. Well, sometimes – very often, these are soft targets. It's so difficult sometimes to prevent completely, but with a greater sharing of intelligence – and I think there's greater cooperation now with the G5 Sahel, the Multinational Joint Task Force, the Americans have a presence here – we hope to be turning the corner very soon.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Final question will come from Tony Ailemen of *BusinessDay* newspaper.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary of State, my name is – my name is Tony Aileman, reporter for *BusinessDay* newspaper. Sir, we – when you were speaking recently because of your trip you did – African countries to be careful with the kind

of loans they take from China. Sir, you also are aware that African countries are facing massive infrastructure deficiency. So I would like to know what alternatives are available to African countries to be able to get resources to develop their massive infrastructure deficiencies. Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I've commented on this question a couple of other times, and I think it's important that our view be clearly understood. We do not seek to keep Chinese investment dollars from flowing to countries that need those investment dollars. What we are cautioning countries is to look carefully at the implications of the level of debt, the terms of the debt; whether the arrangements around that financing are in fact creating local jobs, local capacity, or are the projects being carried out by foreign labor being brought to your country? Is the structure of the financing such that you will always be in control of your infrastructure? Are there mechanisms to deal with default in a way that you do not lose the ownership of your own assets? These are national assets, whether they're ports or railroads or major highways.

And we have seen this occur in other countries where countries were not so careful, and as a result they got themselves in a situation where they ultimately lost control of their infrastructure, they lost the ownership of it, they lost the operatorship of it. And that's the caution we have. There are very well-known international rules and norms, well-known financing structures to deal with unforeseen circumstances, and I think we're just – we're cautioning countries to look carefully.

And there are other alternatives. There are other alternative financing mechanisms available, and I think in particular, if governments create the right conditions around those infrastructure investments, there are also great potential for public-private sector co-investing in infrastructure. And we are developing mechanisms and the President has charged some of his executive staff back home to begin to develop alternative financing mechanisms that will also create alternative opportunities to what China is offering. And again, it may be that China is fine, but we have seen many, many examples around the world where it didn't work out so well for the host country. And as friends of all countries, we're just asking: Be careful.

MODERATOR: On behalf of the presidency and the state house press corps, I'd like to say thank you to Mr. Secretary and the Honorable Minister Onyeama.

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