

Transcript of remarks delivered by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari at the United States Institute of Peace on July 22, 2015:

I am delighted to be here this morning, and I wish to thank the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Atlantic Council, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES) for providing me with this platform to share with this distinguished audience of eminent personalities, my hopes and thoughts about my country, Nigeria.

The think tanks that came together to organize today's event are by no means new to Nigeria. Several of them and a good number of individuals have, over the years, organized meetings and symposia to shed light on diverse issues pertaining to Nigeria. Others, like the NDI, IRI, and IFES have for a long period been partners in Nigeria's electoral processes.

The contributions of the IRI, NDI and IFES to the success of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria are well documented. I would like to use this opportunity to thank them for their partnership and support to the democratization process in Nigeria. Your doggedness, in calling a spade a spade in 2003, 2007 and 2011 have been greatly appreciated by us Nigerians who are dedicated to ensuring free and fair elections in our country. My appreciation also goes to the CSIS, USIP, and the Atlantic Council for their continued engagement and interest in Nigeria. The unique perspectives and clarity you bring to bear on your analyses of contemporary issues in Nigeria are of profound importance to my country. Thank you for the interest you have consistently shown on elections in our country.

Naturally, being far removed from the arena of action, and not being participants in the events you analyze on a regular basis, has its own pitfalls, the most common being arm-chair analysts. Let me illustrate with just one example. In the months leading up to the recent general elections in Nigeria, very few in the mass media and the policy community here in Washington gave Nigeria as little as half a chance to pull through. All over this city, the common view held and frequently expressed was of Nigeria on the brink.

As far as the critics and doomsday merchants were concerned, Nigeria's end was the 2015 general elections. Nigeria was not expected to make it. The general perception was that Nigeria would be undone by violent and disputed elections riven with deep ethnic and religious divisions.

You all know what happened. Nigeria confounded the pessimists and its critics. All those who predicted the worst possible post-election scenarios for Nigeria missed the mark by very wide margins, because the premises upon which their narratives were based were simply wrong.

The peaceful conduct and outcome of the 2015 general elections attest to the fact that elections in Africa can be conducted in a free, fair and credible manner, just like in any other part of the world. Those elections were different from previous ones, not only because citizens were allowed to vote, but more importantly, because their votes counted. I must therefore, salute the patriotism and commitment of the Nigerian people who conducted themselves peacefully and responsibly during and after the elections. Similarly, I must also commend the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the civil society organizations, and other non-state actors for their various efforts at improving the electoral process and entrenching the democratic culture.

I would like to seize this opportunity also, to once again, pay tribute to my predecessor, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan for his uncommon display of statesmanship in setting the pace for Africa. His conduct and outlook in the aftermath of the elections have further proven that the African electoral system is gaining strength and maturity.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Important lessons are being learned from the successful conduct of those elections. Our electoral processes are evolving. Nigerians of all political leanings recognize that there is much work to be done to improve electoral transparency and the integrity of elections. I feel confident that, going forward, our electoral body will apply lessons learned to improve its processes, including the use of appropriate technologies in the conduct of elections, and innovative approaches to voter education. To this end, I intend to raise the cost of impunity by working with the National Assembly to strengthen our electoral laws in ways that would provide stiffer penalties against all forms of electoral malpractices. The enforcement of the laws would equally be given greater impetus.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the issue of terrorism, Nigerians have lived with fear and insecurity for far too long. The human and material costs of the insurgency in my country and to my people are staggering and unacceptable.

Defeating Boko Haram and finding a durable solution to the underlying causes of the insecurity in Nigeria are therefore a major priority of the new administration. Nigerians understand that terrorism stifles development and undermines the stability of society. The Government that I lead is committed, and will do whatever it takes, to free Nigeria from the menace of terrorism. No matter how long it takes, we will reclaim every inch of Nigerian territory that is under the control of Boko Haram. We shall continue to do these within the framework of the rule of law and in compliance with our international and domestic human rights obligations.

Let me emphasize that, as a Government, we have no illusions whatsoever about the enormity of the challenges ahead of us. We know that it will be a long and bruising struggle, but this is a fight we are in to win. Failure is not an option for us. We do not contemplate it.

In the first week of my presidency, I visited Chad and Niger to strengthen cooperation within the Lake Chad Basin Commission Members, the primary region of the Boko Haram insurgency. Upon my return to Nigeria from the US, I shall visit Cameroon on the 29th of July to further strengthen our sub-regional efforts at countering terrorism. Already, I have released twenty-one million US Dollars (\$21 million) for the rapid take-off of the Multi-National Joint Task Force. This is the force set up by the countries of the Lake Chad Basin Commission, comprising Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria plus Benin to jointly combat the insurgency.

We are confident that we will defeat terrorism in our country and region, because we have the will to win this fight. We will win because we have the support of the Nigerian people who voted us into office to do things differently in order to secure them from harm and provide for their prosperity and well being. We will win because the United States and indeed, the International Community have pledged to stand with us in solidarity.

But winning the battle against terrorism means we have to do things differently; after all, the race for the future will never be won by going backward or standing still. Winning means we must change our strategy in a manner that will prioritize the mobilization of maximum capacity to fight terrorism, while ensuring the safety and protection of local communities in the frontline of the fight against terrorism. We are also improving cooperation and coordination with our neighbours and other international partners to add depth and muscle to our overall strategy.

In our efforts at combating the activities of Boko Haram, the new Government has sought and obtained the support of not only our neighbours other international friends and partners. Regrettably, the blanket application of the Leahy Law by the United States on the grounds of unproven allegations of human rights violations levelled against our forces has denied us access to appropriate strategic weapons to prosecute the war against the insurgents. In the face of abduction of innocent school girls from their hostels, indiscriminate bombings of civilians in markets and places of worship, our forces have remained largely impotent because they do not possess the appropriate weapons and technology which they could have had, had the so called human rights violations not been an obstacle.

Unwittingly, and I dare say, unintentionally, the application of the Leahy law amendment by the U. S. Government has aided and abated the Boko Haram terrorist group in the prosecution of its extremist ideology and hate, the indiscriminate killings and maiming of civilians, in raping of women and girls, and in their other heinous crimes. I believe this is not the spirit of the Leahy Laws. I know the American people cannot support any group engaged in these crimes.

I therefore strongly appeal to both the Executive Arm and the US Congress to examine how the US Government can provide us with far more substantial counter-terrorism assistance with minimal strings. The longer we delay, the deadlier the Boko Haram gets. At all events, we have re-written the rules of engagement protecting the rights of combatants and in particular safeguarding civilians in theatres of conflict.

As we ramp up our efforts to defeat Boko Haram, we know that winning this battle sustainably will require that we expand economic opportunities and create jobs for our teeming young population. We must also improve the quality of governance; ensure that governments at all levels are responsive, inclusive, transparent and accountable, and that public institutions deliver services in a timely and efficient manner. We must win and sustain the trust of the people we govern.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The fight against corruption is a full time job that the Federal Government will carry with sustained resolve. I have always maintained zero tolerance for corruption. I am even more committed to fighting this number one enemy decisively because I am convinced beyond any shadow of a doubt that the much needed impetus for our country's survival is held back by corruption. I will not allow this to continue. Again, as with every action of the government that I lead, we would be fair, just, and scrupulously follow due process, and the rule of law, as enshrined in our Constitution. I will lead by example to ensure the prudent management of Nigeria's resources. The government will plug the leakages that fuel corruption in Nigeria.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that the future of Nigeria, indeed the future of Africa, lies in democratic governance, not only because it is the expression of the will of the people, but because democracy can help us build fair, just and inclusive societies. Only in a democracy can Africa's numerous ethnic, cultural and religious diversities find harmonious expression, and the freedoms and opportunities that come with it.

The Federal Government is well aware that building a strong economy will help us build a prosperous, stable, and secure country; a nation where democracy will thrive, businesses will flourish, and where citizens can live and pursue their dreams with dignity and freedom under the protection of the law. I believe the United States can help the democratization process gain roots by investing in the expansion of our educational, health and economic opportunities for the millions of our youth.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fixing Nigeria's problems, as formidable as they are, is the responsibility of Nigerians. The international community can only assist, but the hard work belongs to Nigerians and their government. I will as President, lead from the front, but all Nigerians, including the opposition parties, civil society, business and religious leaders, public servants, labour unions, the youth and professional associations all have important roles to play to get our country back on a sound economic footing.

The political opposition must see itself as an integral part in ensuring development and good governance for the citizenry. Governance in a democracy is always a shared responsibility, a fact underscored by the current power configuration in Nigeria in which the opposition parties not only has a strong representation in the National Assembly, but also control 14 out of the 36 states in our federal arrangement. In the United states the Republicans are in fact in control of both Houses of Congress.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me end by restating here that, despite our current challenges, Nigeria's commitment to good governance, anti-corruption, democracy and security of lives and property remains firm. Similarly, I must reaffirm that despite the current challenges that we face domestically, we are ready and willing to face our duties to international peace, stability, security and development as we have done in the past. We shall not shirk our international responsibilities and obligations; we shall do what is expected of us.