

Speech by Atiku Abubakar, Vice President of Federal Republic of Nigeria at the Conference of Security in the Gulf of Guinea organized by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, 20 July 2005.

Check Against Delivery

I am very pleased and honoured by your invitation to speak at this luncheon and the final conference of the CSIS Gulf of Guinea Security Forum. I thank J. Stephen Morrison for extending me the invitation. I also want to particularly thank Senator Chuck Hagel, honorary chair, and David L. Goldwyn and J. Stephen Morrison, the co-Chairs of the CSIS Task Force on Gulf of Guinea Security, for very successfully engaging such a diverse group of experts drawn from key departments of the US government, the business community, multilateral institutions and civil society. I have personally followed with keen interest the initiatives of the CSIS on the Gulf of Guinea since the publication of its 2003-2004 Task Force report on "Rising U.S. Energy Stakes in Africa".

2. Nigeria looks forward to working closely with the United States, within a coherent bilateral and multilateral strategy and framework, to ensure the security and good governance of Nigeria itself and of all Gulf of Guinea states. We will, through our current and future policies, be steadfast in addressing the important issues of human capacity, democracy, transparency and good governance, security and development in Nigeria. It is also in our short and long term strategic interest to help address these key issues in our sister states of the Gulf of Guinea.

The Gulf of Guinea

3. The Gulf of Guinea, consisting of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome & Principe, Gabon and Angola, at once symbolizes in a rather vivid if not spectacular fashion, most of the dangers, the contradictions and the promise of the African continent. The Gulf harbours one of the biggest reserves of oil and gas and one of the richest ecosystems and biodiversity, but also one of the most potentially explosive cocktails of poverty and underdevelopment, organized crime, and unstable regimes. It consists of countries with diverse historical backgrounds, ranging from English speaking Nigeria to French and Portuguese speaking countries with their unique colonial legacies. In Nigeria alone, the Niger Delta region that borders the gulf is the third largest wetland in the world, and covers over 70,000 square kilometers, or 7.5% of Nigeria's landmass. Over 20 million people from more than 40 ethnic groups in about 6,000 autonomous communities, speaking 260 dialects, live in the area. The harmonization of diverse national interests and effective channelling of intra-state rivalries and competition for the exploitation of the region's resources, for the benefit of its citizens, and the

strategic interests of fellow nations, present perhaps the single most challenging foreign policy engagement of Nigeria in the years ahead.

4. The promise, however, lies in the institutionalization of democracy and good governance across the sub-region. With the strengthening of democracy, transparency and accountability, and zero tolerance of corruption, Nigeria, and indeed governments of the Gulf of Guinea states, can address the burning issues of poverty and depravation that breed violence, organized crime, and the potential of terrorism within our borders and beyond. Nigeria recognizes its responsibility and the urgency to provide leadership in integrating the sub-region, improving its governance and security, curbing criminality, and improving the general conditions of living for the sub-region's vast and growing population. We believe Nigeria's stability and leadership of the Gulf of Guinea is crucial to the future of the sub-region.

Democracy and Governance

5. Democracy and good governance are very vital and necessary to all our efforts to provide stability and eradicate poverty in the Gulf of Guinea. There is no security and certainly there will be no energy security in the Gulf of Guinea without good governance and democracy in the sub-region. The foundation of US policy in the Gulf, therefore, must be based on providing assistance for the establishment, deepening, and institutionalizing democracy in all countries of the sub-region. As you know, Nigeria is facing a crucial election in two years. The 2007 elections will be a watershed in Nigeria's history; it will be a crucial election in much the same way as the 2003 election was, but more crucial as it will witness for the first time in Nigeria's history an orderly transfer of power from one individual to another. However, the process needs all the commitment we all can muster, and hands-on guidance and assistance by our friends everywhere in the world. Other countries in the Gulf, including Angola and Chad, are facing a similar impending test in their democratization process.

6. In the case of Nigeria, the most immediate and serious challenge to democracy is our ability to keep the process open, free and fair, with a level playing field for all candidates. We also must strengthen the capacity and independence of our Electoral Commission. It is, therefore, important for us to ensure that the Independent National Electoral Commission is truly independent and its capacity to conduct impartial elections strongly enhanced. For elections to be credible, rules and procedures regarding polling, counting of votes and collation and reporting of results must be clear, transparent and fair. They must not be designed to give advantage to any one of the parties in the electoral contest. To this end, we will work towards reforming the conduct of candidates, educating their supporters and squarely addressing all forms of electoral misconduct. We will require the assistance of the United States and other countries to help strengthen our civil society groups to improve their capacity in the areas of human rights and transparency as a way of strengthening the foundations of free and fair elections.

7. For our elections not be perceived rightly or wrongly to favour any candidate or party, we are debating how to impose limits to campaign spending and contributions to political parties and candidates, as well as ensuring strict enforcement of the electoral rules, including rules about access of parties to the mass media, security and election monitoring. And, to help discourage electoral fraud, all election disputes are to be resolved promptly, and prior to the date of assumption of office of the eventual winner. We will ensure that elections themselves take place in a safe, secure atmosphere, free of intimidation, coercion and illegal inducement. If we can do that, on our own initiative and with the help of our friends, I am convinced our conduct of the 2007 elections will be significantly better than that of 2003, and Nigeria's democracy will take firm roots. Securing democracy in Nigeria will undoubtedly go a long way to securing democracy in the Gulf of Guinea. In short, leaderships in the Gulf of Guinea must form a partnership with the international community, particularly the United States, to ensure that governance within the entire region improves and democracy is entrenched as a matter of urgency.

Poverty Eradication/Economic Reform

8. Africa's enduring poverty is one of the greatest impediments to the internal security of our countries and, in the long run, poses a real and dangerous threat to global security. Where poverty endures, democracy is always in danger. Democracy to our people will remain meaningless if there continues to be no discernible and progressive improvement in their living conditions. The sustenance of democracy therefore depends largely on the ability of democratic governments to alleviate poverty and deprivation and give hope and opportunity in the face of rising expectations.

9. Nigeria indeed suffers from extreme poverty. Approximately 57% of our 130 million people live in absolute poverty. 25% of sub-Saharan Africans live in Nigeria; the GDP per capita is just over \$300. Over 70% of Nigerians live on less than \$1 a day. Less than 60% of primary aged children attend school, with over 7 million primary school age children not in school. One birth in a hundred results in the death of the mother; in some parts of the country maternal mortality is much higher. Less than 50% of the rural population has access to clean water. Yet, Nigeria is the most under-aided low-income country, with net transfers, including grants per capita, amounting to minus \$9 in 2003, compared to an average of \$37 for low income countries.

10. This level of poverty is unacceptable. Its alleviation squarely depends on our ability, our resolve, and commitment to reform our economy and our polity in order to cut down on waste and corruption and devote our resources to investing in and improving our social services. We believe in the necessity, and indeed the inevitability, of a massive, radical and innovatory reform of our economy as, we firmly believe, there is no alternative to economic reform in Nigeria as much as there is no alternative to democracy and good

governance. Believe that the same holds true with all countries of the Gulf of Guinea.

11. The first step we took in instituting a credible economic reform when we came to office in 1999 was to admit the failure of government to inspire, much less lead the way to, economic development. We therefore embarked on a difficult but necessary deregulation of the economy and privatisation of government controlled enterprises, including the petroleum and gas sector, and ports and transportation. Under the leadership of President Obasanjo, Nigeria took very courageous and forward-looking steps to institutionalise our economic reform program and make it a permanent endeavour even after the current dispensation. The talented and committed men and women that constituted the Economic Management Team are among the finest Nigeria can offer. The team, chaired by the President himself, has been guiding the economic reform process with an outstanding degree of success, and there have been very positive and noticeable changes in many aspects of the economy and the society at large.

12. Our overall macro-economic management is being conducted with great commitment and resolve. There is a discernible new philosophy that the overall interests of the nation and our people are paramount, over and above the interests of a relatively small clique of corrupt bureaucrats in partnership with private sector speculators and rent seekers who have hitherto held the economy hostage. Nigeria needs to ensure the institutionalisation of the present economic reform and imbibe its principles in future generation of policy makers. In my judgement, the greatest threat to the current reform efforts lies less in the likelihood of policy reversals but more in the lack of expanding its client base. Any rational and informed administration that succeeds the Obasanjo government can find it neither realistic nor expedient to change or reverse the current reform. However, the reform process today is in the hands of only a small group but very competent technocrats that we carefully selected to engineer the process. To sustain the reform requires additional help from our friends and the international community not only to carry it to its logical conclusion but also institutionalize and diversify its acceptance. I believe, the reform, to be far-reaching and long lasting, must appeal to, engender enthusiasm in, and gain the commitment of a wide constituency beyond the current circle of its architects and implementers. We must devise the means of making the average Nigerian, if not indeed every Nigerian, a direct stakeholder in the reform process. We will appreciate the assistance of the United States in this regard.

13. There is no doubt that we will prosecute the reform agenda vigorously and studiously beyond 2007, as we recognize that it represents one great window of opportunity for Nigeria to realize its full potentials for greatness, stability, peace and prosperity. If the 2007 elections were to be fought and won on the platform of real issues, the issue of reform and its continuity will certainly occupy a central place. We cannot pay a greater tribute to the legacy of President Obasanjo better than to ensure a faithful and

uninterrupted implementation of the reform during and beyond 2007. We are equally keen and eager to see that the success of our reform sets an example to other countries in the sub-region and impacts directly on the long term security, stability and progress of the Gulf of Guinea. The United States and the international community can best applaud our reform by helping us strengthen our internal capacity (which remains weak), expanding the cadre of capable administrators (which remains small), strengthening our poverty reduction mechanisms, and supporting civil society groups to support the reform and encourage its popularity within the overall body polity.

Anti-corruption

14. Across the Gulf of Guinea sub-region, echoes of corruption and theft of public resources echo loud and clear everywhere. Corruption is a criminal economic sabotage, but it is even worse than that. The prevalence of corruption is a direct threat to regional security as it feeds into money laundering and violent crime. We cannot progress in working together as sister countries in the sub-region, and with our development partners within the international community, if we are perceived as no more than a motley group of kleptocratic small states who, by accident of geography, happen to be oil-rich, but equally richly endowed with a particular specialty of stealing those resources only to squander them on habitual ego trips to the great detriment of our people and our nations.

15. Part and parcel of the reform in Nigeria is our onslaught on corruption, graft, and other vices such as money laundering and advanced fee fraud. As a Nigerian, it breaks my heart every time I hear or read about the association of the good name of my country with corruption and fraud, as if Nigeria is a synonym of avarice and graft. I am sure it equally breaks the heart of every true Nigerian. In certain cultural backgrounds, including the one that I come from, stealing is such a despicable and intolerable crime.

16. However, corruption and its persistence remains part of the most shameful features of our public life. The cankerworm has eaten deep into the fabric of society and corrupted even the most sacred and sacrosanct aspects. No noble policy of government or any laudable program stands the chance of success if we tolerate a situation in which public resources are habitually and brazenly frittered away and pilfered with impunity by those entrusted with them. Indeed, corruption has over the years distorted planning and implementation of policies, prevented equity and even distribution of opportunities and resources, hampered economic growth and development, and gave Nigeria an overall bad name everywhere. For this reason, one of the ways in which all genuine friends of Nigeria can help its development is by helping us to fight against corruption in all its manifestations. In the words of President Obasanjo, "corruption must be fought to a standstill".

17. Part of the most serious aspects of the corruption, and one with far-reaching implications to regional security and the future of the Gulf of Guinea, is the "crude stealing of crude oil" that grows ever increasingly in the region.

Estimates vary as to the extent of the epidemic, which is seen to have its epicentre in Nigeria's Niger Delta, from 80,000 to 300,000 barrels per day. Allegations also vary as to those responsible, ranging from the loose-cannon armed militias operating in the Delta, organized local crime syndicates with collaborators in the oil companies and corporations, politicians operating thug groups in search of resources to fund thuggery and election rigging, high ranking Naval officers, arms traffickers, and even allegedly high ranking officers of government. I even read somewhere that an overseas mafia is responsible for a lot of the oil theft.

18. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the security situation in Nigeria's Niger Delta is serious and compelling. It assumes a more complex and dangerous dimensions and therefore requires urgent attention and help if, as is alleged, high ranking government officials are directly or indirectly involved in illegal trafficking of stolen crude. We cannot ensure the long-term security of the Niger Delta or the Gulf of Guinea without containing and eliminating this dangerous development. If the current trend in the Niger Delta is left to spread to other countries of the Gulf, the implications to international energy security and the negative fallout on our prospect to develop can only be imagined.

19. If the allegations of involvement of high level public officers are credible, the region and the international community must brace up and face the threat more directly. On our own part, our anti-corruption war will be extended into the private sector. Anti-corruption agencies must be empowered to delve deeply and directly into the activities and finances of private sector companies. I intend to convene soon a roundtable of heads of major corporations and companies in our private sector to look critically into business ethics and ways in which we would ensure the full integration of their practices into the philosophy and objectives of our economic reform and anti-corruption policies.

20. At the public sector level, we will reconsider the immunity clause in our constitution which shields a category of officers of government at the highest level from civil and criminal prosecution. At a point in our national life, it became so easy and many found it so convenient to stick the label of corruption against serving leaders, and it distracted attention so much, that it was deemed necessary to protect a particular category of them with an immunity clause in the constitution. However, immunity from criminal prosecution has come to mean impunity for many of our elected officials. And after the flurry of recent allegations, some of which border on criminal economic sabotage, I am convinced that it might be time we reconsidered the immunity clause. President Obasanjo has taken the lead in this direction, and part of our effort to amend the constitution has to do with the need to remove the immunity clause.

21. Indeed, despite reasons borne out of experience, the immunity clause does not speak well of the principles of equality before the law, for a certain

category of our public officers to be automatically and fully immune from prosecution for all misdeeds. Our system must devise a way of protecting such office holders from frivolous litigations, but not through automatic and total immunity. Corruption and the practice of liberal democracy cannot co-exist. We will not leave it to history and posterity to judge us for our actions while holding public trust. One way or the other, our laws must be made such that public officers in the highest offices of the land are protected from mischievous litigations, but they must be held accountable by the same laws that send to jail a common man who steals what does not rightly belong to him. Not only must we all be equal before the law; we must be seen to be equal before the law. We cannot and we will not condone corruption, in whatever form, including the so-called oil bunkering, and continue to demand that we are taken seriously by the international community.

22. We will sustain the fight until we triumph against corruption in Nigeria; we will defeat the oil bunkerers and their sponsors; we will continue to tackle the root causes that fan armed militia activities and illegal arms importation in the Niger Delta, including a structured and sustained demobilization of armed groups. We will wage a sustained war against organized crime syndicates wherever they operate in the sub-region. We cannot allow violence to thrive anywhere in the Niger Delta, as the impact on our communities and economic interests is unacceptable. We call upon the international community to help us put in place better mechanisms for tracing, identifying and prosecuting those involved in organized crime, oil bunkering and money laundering at any level of our public services. Crude oil fingerprinting technology is well advanced; we must be assisted to employ such technology, among other means, to track stolen oil and bring to book those who launder its proceeds. We are ready and prepared to work closely with the United States and other countries and organizations to help us build capacity in governance and constructively address the question of security throughout the West African region. International cooperation is vital to our success.

Debt

23. The spirit of such international cooperation was shown last month when we concluded a debt relief arrangement with the Paris Club of creditor nations. By this, Nigeria's 36 billion dollar debt was reduced by two thirds its face value. We were able to repay 6 billion dollars in arrears and pledged to eliminate the entire debt within three years. We thank those who made the debt deal possible, and thank them also for the agreement to cancel 40 billion dollars in multilateral debt to 18 poor countries in Africa and elsewhere. We particularly thank President Obasanjo for his untiring efforts that have yielded dividends. Nigerians of the present and future generations will remember him for the reliance of his efforts and statesmanship in securing the debt deal. I have no doubt that any future administration in Nigeria will implement faithfully the terms of the deal and ensure that we leave for good the company of heavily indebted nations.

24. We applaud the debt initiative as, across the spectrum of countries that benefited from it, it is estimated that over 500 million people would be lifted out of extreme poverty. Thirty million children who would otherwise die before their fifth birthday would be saved, as would more than two million mothers who would otherwise have died during pregnancy and child birth. The resources that were so freed would also educate hundreds of millions of women and girls, and millions would have access to clean water for the first time. For the debt relief to endure and produce the results we expected, the developing countries deserve improved global terms of trade. That is on the part of the international community. On the part of beneficiaries of the debt relief, we have a great moral responsibility to put in place enduring mechanisms to ensure that the relief proceeds do not fall victim to the corrupt practices of the past. The proceeds must be concretely invested in social services, health and education and the proof of such investment, in terms of concrete results, provided to the international community as and when required.

Conclusion

25. I wish to conclude this short address by re-emphasizing Nigeria's determination to live in a secure, stable, friendly and cooperative neighbourhood. To this end, we concluded a number of mutual treaties and agreements with all our land and maritime neighbours in the sub-region. We entered into a joint development treaty with Sao Tome and Principe in February 2001 when our mutual efforts to reach agreement over our common boundary reached a deadlock. We have also successfully negotiated agreements with Equatorial Guinea and Togo. We will continue to abide by the International Court of Justice ruling on our dispute with Cameroon. We no longer have any source of contention on our borders with Chad. Indeed, we have no border conflict with any of our neighbours. We took the lead in establishing the Gulf of Guinea Commission to promote mutual cooperation, confidence and trust, and serve as a platform for the promotion of the economic, political, environmental and security interests of member states, which include Congo Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Conscious of our position as the most populous country and the biggest economy in the region, and the potentials for suspicion of our intentions, it is imperative that we took the lead in promoting cooperation and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

26. We are ready to cooperate with the international community, with our friends, particularly the United States, to ensure peace and security in all countries of the sub-region. We will remain steadfast in addressing the important issues of human capacity, democracy, transparency and good governance, regional collective security, and development. With the increasing importance of the Gulf of Guinea to the world economy, there must be an increasing political will on Nigeria's part to ensure security in the area. We are determined to turn the area into a viable, democratic, stable, and a violence-free source of oil for the international market and for the

development of our own countries. And we shall continue to work closely with our friends, especially the United States, to achieve this objective.

27. Thank you all for your attention. God bless Nigeria; God bless the United States of America.