

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing****Nigeria: Elections and Human Rights****Thursday, December 6, 2018****2255 Rayburn House Office Building****Written Testimony submitted by Olubukola Ademola-Adelehin**

Co-Chairmen Hultgren and McGovern, Members of the Lantos Commission, and distinguished guests, it is an honor to have written this statement. Thank you for convening a timely and strategic contribution to violence free general elections in Nigeria in 2019.

This testimony is from the observation of Search for Common Ground (Search) in Nigeria of the emerging issues and concerns about the 2019 general elections of communities where Search has peacebuilding interventions. Search is the largest dedicated peacebuilding organization in the world with peacebuilding programming in Nigeria since 2004. Some of the opinions expressed in this statement are the lessons learned from Search's National Election Early Warning System (NEEWS) implemented in the 2015 general elections and the review of the reports of other partner organizations working on credible and peaceful elections in Nigeria. While this submission is based on this experience, the thoughts are my own and do not necessarily reflect the institutional position of Search for Common Ground.

Credible, free, fair, and peaceful 2019 general elections are an ambitious and important milestone for consolidating democratic governance in Nigeria and to build upon the heroic peaceful transition of presidential power achieved in 2015. Yet, there are strong indications that the elections will be closely competed by the two main political parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and People's Democratic Party (PDP) with potential risk of outbreak of violence before, during, and after the elections. We would like to highlight three factors that could increase the potential for violence in the 2019 general elections:

**1. Existing conflict and security challenges serve political purposes by deepening divisions.**

Nigeria has ongoing conflict and security challenges in different regions of the country. The northeast region has an ongoing, decade-old insurgency with Boko Haram that has reportedly killed thousands of people and displaced over two million others.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, since July 2018, there have been sustained insurgent attacks on the military deployed for counter-insurgency missions. The ongoing insecurity thereby increases the vulnerability of local population to invasion and attacks. The Middle Belt region of Nigeria is beleaguered with multi-layered conflict between farming and pastoralist communities over access to resources. The conflict has reportedly killed

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<sup>1</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. "Boko Haram in Nigeria." Global Conflict Tracker. December 05, 2018. Accessed December 06, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/boko-haram-in-nigeria>.

more people than the Boko Haram insurgency in the first half of 2018. Criminality, lack of governance, and manipulation of ethnoreligious identity have been used to invoke primordial sentiment that has intensified the violence and inhibits opportunities for peaceful resolution of the conflict. Agitations and violent protest by members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, with a large followership in Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, and Zamfara states; unresolved militancy in the Niger Delta region and pro-Biafra agitations in the southeast region are examples of major ongoing challenges with implications for the elections. The protracted and pervasive nature of the conflicts across the country may spill over into political contest between or within the political parties, deepening the divisive narratives of the parties. The intersection of pre-existing conflicts and political opportunism in the lead-up to the elections was one strong dynamic in the violence that broke out in Plateau state in June 2018. The proliferation of armed groups and the widespread availability of arms because of these conflicts increase the likelihood for misuse in the election by unauthorized persons to either manipulate or disrupt the electioneering process in the states. The capacity of the federal government to address the insecurity seems to be limited, the military is overstretched, and the role of the police in internal security operation remains limited.

**2. The conduct of key stakeholders and agencies is perceived as partisan or provokes violence.**

Electoral Management Bodies, Security Agencies, and Political Parties are critical stakeholders that determine the peacefulness of an electoral process. The integrity, competence, and professionalism of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for example is crucial in the delivery of credible and violence free elections. Electoral violence in previous Nigerian elections was linked with perceived partiality of INEC officials as the principal trigger of electoral violence. Actions or inactions of INEC, including distribution and adequacy of polling units and election materials, collation and announcement of results, could trigger violence if seen to be done in a partisan manner. Already, the impartiality of the INEC has come into question. The main opposition party, the PDP, and some other interest groups have at different times called for the removal of the current Chairperson of INEC for perceived partiality in favor of the ruling party, APC. Such allegations are potential excuses for a disputed election result, which could trigger of violence as witnessed in the 2011 post presidential election violence. Internal democracy in political parties in Nigeria is still a challenge with far reaching implications for the electioneering process. Biased candidate selection processes, use of political thugs, and inducement of voters, especially financial inducement has all been openly reported in the primary election period. These trends must be addressed before the general elections or risk undermining the credibility and peacefulness of the elections. The conduct of security personnel surrounding the election is also very critical. Inadequate or excessive deployment of security personnel in elections can be a potential source of tension and violence.<sup>2</sup>

**3. Traditional and social media propagate inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech that encourages violence.** Statements by political actors have the capacity to trigger electoral violence; the killing of at least 800 people in the post-election violence of the 2011 general elections is a reminder of this. However, the capacity to incite violence increases significantly especially when

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<sup>2</sup> "The War against Opposition and Militarization of Nigeria's Electoral Process." Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC). August 04, 2014. Accessed December 06, 2018. <http://placng.org/legist/the-war-against-opposition-and-militarization-of-nigerias-electoral-process/>.

the media is involved. Perceived partisanship and partiality by the media, the broadcast and publishing of hateful, provocative, and sensational messages were identified by a recent study as the actions of the media that could trigger electoral violence.<sup>3</sup> The failure of media regulatory bodies to ensure adherence to established rules by the media is a challenge that must be overcome to manage the spread of hate speech and misinformation before, during, and after the election process. The actual and potential influence the media can have on electoral violence in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized.

### **Opportunities for credible and violence-free 2015 general elections in Nigeria:**

Many of these issues risk not only inciting violence during election periods but also require a long-term engagement strategy from the Nigerian government and partner governments to address the core drivers of violence across the country. Nigeria is a bell weather for democracy across the region and peaceful, credible elections in Nigeria can deepen Nigeria's role as a civic leader on the continent. United States support to election monitoring and violence reduction has been critical to Nigeria over the years. Technical and financial support should be used to take early action to address potential outbreak of violence in the electoral process. Despite major risk factors for electoral violence surrounding the February 2019 presidential elections, there are opportunities to support individuals and institutions addressing these key risk areas. We will list four opportunities below:

- **Reinforce INEC's capacity to fulfil its constitutional role.**  
INEC's conduct of the 2015 general elections was judged to be free and credible with an outcome accepted by the candidates. This opportunity and good will should be built upon to fulfil this role in the completion of the 2019 general elections. The US Government, through USAID, should continue and expand its support to the independence of INEC by helping to clarify its legal framework and provide adequate funding for its activity and that of its supporting institutions. This support will be critical in enabling INEC to operate free from external pressure or intimidation and maintain its neutrality and professionalism. The focus on security agencies and INEC should be to ensure that they act, and are seen to act, in an impartial manner by maintaining the highest standards of professionalism and allegiance to the Nigerian State and not any political party.
- **Engage and fully resource civil society on conflict-sensitivity, transparency, and violence mitigation.** Civil society organizations have demonstrated their capacity as key contributors to credible, free, fair and non-violent elections in Nigeria with interventions community to national level. It also has experience leading peacebuilding initiatives at especially Track II and Track III level, engaging through unofficial channels to local influencers. Early warning and response systems, polls, surveys, and research by civil society organizations were instrumental in identifying potential risks of violence in elections in Nigeria. When early warning is combined with quick, evidence-driven, and community-based analysis and response mechanisms, they are well-positioned to douse tension and mitigate violence in the 2019 elections. Dialogue, mediation, and other conflict mitigation and transformation activities of civil society contributed to the more

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<sup>3</sup> "Survey Warns Hate Speech, Drug Abuse May Trigger Violence in 2019." The Guardian. July 06, 2018. Accessed December 06, 2018. <https://guardian.ng/politics/survey-warns-hate-speech-drug-abuse-may-trigger-violence-in-2019/>.

peaceful outcome of 2015 elections when compared with 2011. Election observation, “Situation Rooms,” and the deployed strategic and operational level support to the electioneering process were key contributions of the civil society in 2015 that should be repeated in the coming months. The US Government can expand conflict-sensitivity training of journalists, and multilevel dialogue at the community and state level using the “Peace Architecture” approach to consolidating inclusive peace and security in elections process<sup>4</sup> Specific attention should be paid on engaging local and national media outlets on how to prevent the spread of hateful speech and misinformation, especially as it regards the process and outcomes of the election.

- **Support public commitments for peace between political parties, religious leaders, and other influential Nigerian figures.** Eminent and influential figures in Nigeria played a key role in ushering in peaceful and credible elections in 2015 and can do so again in 2019. In November 2018, the National Peace Committee engaged political parties on the need for politicians to create a favourable and conducive environment for the conduct of free, fair and credible elections in 2019. This engagement is expected to be followed by a December 11 signing of Peace Accord by the political parties. *The US Government should show its support for these commitments to non-violence.* Other actors not directly involved in the major political parties are looking to build off the success of the 2015 elections and joining in the momentum of the National Peace Committee. The Sultan of Sokoto and the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have signed a peace pact, to enable a peaceful atmosphere before, during, and after the 2019 general elections with their constituencies. The US Government and international partners should support the National Peace Committee to continue to use its good offices to manage intra- and inter- political parties’ dynamics that could have negative impact on the election. These dialogues and peace pacts should be replicated at the state level for gubernatorial races and publicly supported by the U.S. and other partner governments.
- **Reinvigorate coordination and planning at the principal or ministerial level between embassies based in Nigeria to jointly prepare messaging and potential responses to election scenarios.** The US Government should coordinate the support of other governments interested in credible and peaceful elections. Together, with the NGO community, such as through the Peace and Security Network (PSN), the US Government and like-minded governments should release proactive statements from the principal or ministerial level that reaffirm their position and provide action plans on how the US Government will respond in various potential scenarios.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written submission. We look forward to working with you to ensure peaceful presidential elections in February 2019 and beyond.

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<sup>4</sup> The Peace Architecture Approach is a formula for collective action to improve community security and inclusive governance across the country. This approach recognizes the unique context of each community with conflict and engages local actors, such as the religious community, media, and civil society, to work with government actors to identify and deal with conflict. Search is supported in this endeavor by the State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) and the USAID Office of Conflict Mitigation and Management (CMM), among others.