

Nigeria's quandaries

The Washington Times

July 8, 2004

F. Andy Messing Jr. and David Ratliff, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Nigeria is among the richest African nations in natural resources, yet remains plagued by AIDS, drugs, oil industry attacks and religious conflict.

Leaving no sector untouched, these problems affect the political, social, economic, and security aspects throughout the nation. However, despite the current chaos, Nigeria remains one of the few African nations with the potential to bring peace and stability to the region.

During the Age of Imperialism, Britain forcibly joined more than 250 tribes into one political entity. Since the end of British rule, Nigeria has struggled to achieve a national identity. A fragile federalist system and series of military dictatorships has resulted in a delicate social balance that might cause a Yugoslavian-style implosion during the next decade.

In the political realm, President Olusegun Obasanjo's 1999 election marked the first democratically elected leader in 16 years. Afterward, there was hope Mr. Obasanjo would tackle the many problems facing the country. This optimism soon withered as endemic corruption continued permeating every sector of the government and society.

Ironically, even the rapid spread of AIDS is, in part, due to corruption. Citizens in many areas have no available health care because funds earmarked for hospitals and clinics have "disappeared," and in the cities health care is inadequate since much medical equipment is sold on the black market. Often, latex gloves are hastily washed and reused, spreading instead of preventing diseases.

The AIDS population is just under 4 million, affecting 5.4 percent of the population. Life expectancy has dropped to 45 years, infant mortality rates have increased, and entire families have been decimated by this disease. Accordingly, without massive aid, the infected population will continue increasing.

Piggybacking that social problem is Nigerian control of the sub-Saharan narcotics market. It is a major hub for Asian heroin, sells locally grown marijuana and has recently become a trafficker of South American cocaine.

A "mule" system of many individuals carrying small quantities of narcotics targets Western nations. The Nigerian equivalent of our Drug Enforcement Administration, the NDLEA, though receiving training and aid from U.S. law enforcement agencies, remains underfunded and underpaid, exacerbating the already high corruption and rocking a deteriorating justice system.

Nigeria accounts for a very important 10 percent of U.S. oil imports. Even a 5 percent disruption of total oil imports puts the U.S. in gas lines and a recession. Though Nigeria is an oil exporter, it lacks enough fuel for its own consumption.

Heavy subsidization of gas prices has made black market sales extremely profitable, resulting in consistent destruction of pipelines due to thievery. Over 20 years, spills due to this have caused at least 2.5 million barrels of oil, equivalent to 10 Exxon Valdez disasters, to poison the land.

This environmental damage has resulted in violent attacks on the oil industry. Two Americans from Chevron-Texaco were killed on April 24, 2004, and 17 taken hostage in 2003. These attacks affect world fuel prices and the Nigerian economy, since 90 percent of its revenue comes from oil sales.

Yet another security threat comes from factional fighting between the northern Muslims (Hausa) and southern Christians (Ibos), who have been rapidly killing each other over the last 20 years. Attempting succession in 1967, the Ibos formed the state of Biafra and prompted a civil war that killed more than 1 million. Just in the past five years, more than 10,000 have been killed in religious fighting. Violence during the 2002 Miss World Pageant led to more than 200 dead.

Tensions remain wherever Muslims and Christians cohabit and violence will continue unless there are accommodations.

Despite the many problems, the situation is not hopeless. Nigeria is among the largest African countries in population and wealth, comparatively democratic, and possesses a relatively disciplined army. These conditions ripen the possibility Nigeria can become an African leader. A strong regional force can be a positive influence on its neighbors through increased trade, political stability, and security.

A carefully constructed and closely monitored Marshall Plan, funded proportionally by those Western countries that benefit from Nigeria's oil, could alleviate many of its existing problems, thus ensuring Nigeria is a stable energy source. It would diminish the possibility of civil war or state fragmentation, and help Nigeria become a leader for the African continent.

F. Andy Messing Jr., a retired major in the U.S. Special Forces who has observed 27 conflicts worldwide, is executive director of the National Defense Council Foundation in Alexandria. David Ratliff is an NDCF global security analyst.