

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
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Nigeria

In June 1993 Nigeria's military, led by General Ibrahim Babangida, annulled election results, thereby blocking the inauguration of the country's first civilian president in a decade. International observers had declared that the election of president Moshood Abiola was "free and fair" and the U.S. Congress had passed a resolution recognizing its legitimacy. In prodemocracy protests that ensued several hundred demonstrators were killed.

The military coup and repression angered the U.S. (along with the rest of the world), which viewed Nigeria as both a reliable political ally and an economic powerhouse in Africa. The crisis confirmed widespread suspicion

Key Points

- A 1993 military coup stopped Nigeria's return to democratic civilian rule.
- Killings, arrests, and human rights abuses against opponents have been widespread, including the execution of writer Ken Saro-Wiwa.
- Oil keeps the military in power: 90% of Nigeria's foreign revenues come from oil exports.
- The U.S. buys 44% of Nigeria's oil and four U.S. oil companies are drilling in Nigeria.

that Nigeria's military elite was unwilling to relinquish power to a democratically elected civilian government. The Clinton administration quickly condemned the Nigerian military's action and proposed limited diplomatic and economic sanctions. By the time the current ruler, General Sani Abacha, seized power in November 1993, Washington had canceled the visas of important military personnel, restricted arms sales, halted all U.S. economic and military aid, and cut off Nigeria's access to trade credits and guarantees.

Despite these sanctions and diplomatic efforts by the U.S. and international community designed to persuade the Abacha regime to return to the democratic process, political and human rights have steadily deteriorated. General Abacha has ruled by military decrees and effectively neutralized all political opposition. Ousted President-elect Abiola, thousands of labor leaders, prodemocracy and human rights activists, and other opponents were jailed, and hundreds of others have been killed. News media are constantly harassed and several have been banned or had copies of their publications seized. Journalists have been imprisoned, driven underground, or forced into exile.

In November 1995 the Abacha regime horrified the world by executing Ken Saro-Wiwa, an internationally

renown writer and environmentalist and eight of his colleagues. These activists from the southeastern state of Ogoniland were protesting the military dictatorship and its complicity with the Dutch and British-owned Shell oil company's environmentally destructive drilling practices in a 400-square-mile area of the Niger Delta in their home province. Four U.S. companies—Mobil, Chevron, Ashland, and Texaco—also have drilling operations in Nigeria, mainly off-shore.

Washington responded by threatening to freeze Nigerian assets in the U.S. and impose additional economic sanctions, including against oil, which accounts for 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings. Forty-four percent of Nigerian oil goes to the U.S., 5% to Canada, and the remaining 51% to Europe. To date, however, no Nigerian assets have been frozen or economic sanctions have been imposed—an indication of U.S. dependence on oil imports and unwillingness to antagonize transnational corporations.

In 1994 the U.S. classified Nigeria as a major drug trafficking country that was not cooperating with U.S. drug control efforts. This triggered a U.S. law requiring Washington to vote against any IMF or World Bank loans to Nigeria. Except for humanitarian aid, all bilateral and multilateral assistance has therefore been suspended.

Nigeria, Africa's largest and most populous country (more than 90 million), is one of the U.S.'s largest trading partner in Africa and the world's ninth largest oil producer. When Nigeria became independent from Britain in 1960, its size, natural resource wealth, and well-educated leadership positioned it as a regional power in West Africa. As a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Nigeria never officially sided with the U.S., but its foreign policies and UN votes did not contradict American interests. The U.S. welcomed Nigeria's political moderation, encouraged its regional prowess, and tolerated a string of military governments, punctuated by brief intervals of civilian rule. Together with Britain, U.S. military assistance and arms sales helped equip Nigeria's army, the largest in Africa. Except for the Biafran civil war (1967-70), Nigeria had been relatively stable.

When General Abacha shot his way to power, he pledged to restore democracy by January 1, 1996. This did not happen. He now promises to permit new elections and return to democracy in 1998. The military is, however, unlikely to do so unless stronger international measures are imposed.

Despite tough words and some concrete diplomatic and economic measures, the Clinton administration and Congress have resisted imposing oil sanctions, the one move that could quickly force the military dictatorship to capitulate. The U.S. has continued to purchase over a half million barrels of Nigerian oil a day. This equals 8% of total U.S. oil imports—just under what the U.S. buys from the entire Middle East.

While human rights and democracy advocates in Nigeria and the U.S. have called on Washington to impose an oil embargo and prevent new oil-related investments in Nigeria, the Clinton administration instead has opted for “constructive dialogue” with the Abacha regime. Two U.S. emissaries—Donald McHenry and Bill Richardson—were dispatched to convince Abacha to return to civilian rule. However, human rights and democracy advocates worry that Abacha will interpret Washington’s willingness to dialogue as a signal that Washington will not follow through on its threat to impose oil sanctions or freeze assets.

This is not the first time that strategic and economic interests have muted U.S. response to military dictatorships and human rights abuses in Africa. Washington supported dictators such as Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Seko, former Somali leader Mohammed Siad Barre, and Liberia’s former President Samuel K. Doe—all cold war allies well known for their human rights abuses and corruption.

The Nigerian military government has mounted a large public relations campaign aimed at forestalling government sanctions and a freeze on assets. According to the *Washington Post*, General Abacha has spent over \$10 million in a lobbying and public relations campaign since hanging nine Ogoni activists. In Congress, Illinois Senator Carol Moseley-Braun (whose ex-fiance was a lobbyist for Nigeria) has spoken out forcefully against sanctions, pointing to inconsistencies in U.S. human rights policy especially regarding China. Senator Moseley-Braun, who took a controversial “vacation” in Nigeria, has sought to rally the congressional Black Caucus and African Americans to oppose U.S. sanctions against Nigeria. Sanction opponents argue that an oil embargo will increase pump prices in the U.S. and impose further hardships on the Nigerian people.

On the other side, a broad coalition of environmental, human rights, church, and Africa support groups have called on the Clinton administration to impose sanctions and other economic measures. Embargo advocates cite a series of reasons to support their position. They

argue that Washington is already employing sanctions against several other countries—Cuba, Iraq, Iran, and Libya—and therefore cannot claim it is an inappropriate foreign policy tool. A stable, peaceful, and democratic Nigeria offers much better foreign investment and trade opportunities. They contend, as well, that an oil embargo will have minimal impact on U.S. consumer prices since only a fraction of U.S. oil imports come from Nigeria. While sanctions will undoubtedly cause more economic hardships for the Nigerian people, democratic organizations within Nigeria are calling for international sanctions as the only way to pressure for a return to democracy. Given the successful trade embargo that helped force an end to apartheid in South Africa, oil sanctions are seen as an important component in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria.

There is a broad and mounting international outcry against Nigeria’s military dictatorship. Following the execution of Saro-Wiwa and the other activists, the UN’s Human Rights Commission adopted a consensus resolution urging the military government to restore habeas corpus and release all political prisoners. The UN also appointed a special envoy to investigate human rights abuses in Nigeria. The 1996 annual Commonwealth meeting, attended by Britain and its former colonies, imposed a series of nonbinding measures, including stopping arms exports to Nigeria, banning sporting links, downgrading diplomatic missions, restricting visas for Nigerian leaders, and ending military training. Nigeria’s Commonwealth membership was also suspended. Like the U.S., the Commonwealth members stepped back from a full-scale economic boycott, including oil sanctions.

Meanwhile General Abacha continues to flagrantly disregard all international protests. According to a March 1996 State Department report, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests remain common, with the military periodically issuing decrees restricting press freedom and civil liberties.

Shell and other oil companies, for their part, contend they have had no role in Nigeria’s human rights violations. But the environmental pollution from oil drilling is undeniable in Ogoniland, where a half million Nigerians make their meager living from farming and fishing. Oil spills have poisoned the waters, causing massive fish kills and human health problems, while gas fires in oil separation pits have destroyed much of the farmland. Neither Shell nor the military invest more than a pittance of the oil profits into the Ogoniland, so poverty is rampant throughout the region.

Key Problems

- The U.S. has retaliated with a series of economic and diplomatic measures, including halting aid and arms sales but has refused to stop buying Nigerian oil.
- World Bank and IMF loans have been suspended and the UN and the British Commonwealth have also taken measures but have not imposed an oil embargo.
- The Nigerian military is running a \$10 million lobbying campaign in Washington to forestall sanctions.

Nigeria is presently teetering at the edge of political disintegration and possible civil war. International non-governmental organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Sierra Club, and TransAfrica are holding public protests in the U.S. against Shell and the Nigerian government and have

called for a consumer boycott against Shell. In late 1996 the Center for Constitutional Rights, on behalf of the family of Ken Saro-Wiwa, filed a lawsuit against Shell. The suit seeks damages for the extrajudicial murder of Saro-Wiwa.

While public protests mount, the Clinton administration and Congress have been reluctant to take tougher measures. Oil revenues are critical to General Abacha's survival in power and, with almost half the oil going to the U.S., Washington can exert enormous leverage.

Two bills, known as "Nigerian Democracy Acts" were introduced into the House and Senate in November 1995 but never went voted on. The House bill sponsored by Rep. Donald Payne (D/New Jersey) puts into law current U.S. diplomatic sanctions, opposes all foreign aid assistance, and requires periodic reports from the administration on Nigeria's progress towards democracy and human rights. The Senate bill, introduced by Nancy Kassebaum (R/Kansas), states that Washington will prohibit new U.S. investments, aid, and arms sales, freeze U.S. assets of Nigerian leadership, and seek a multilateral oil embargo. The bills basically codified actions already in place; neither calls for an immediate U.S. oil embargo against Nigeria.

These two bills must now be reintroduced into the 105th Congress. They should be strengthened to include oil sanctions and full economic boycott. Their passage depends on strong and vocal public support.

Key Recommendations

- Congress should pass legislation imposing an oil boycott, freezing Nigerian assets, and further tightening the economic screws on the Abacha regime.
- The Clinton administration should take the lead in organizing an effective international embargo against the purchase of Nigerian oil.
- Public protests, including a lawsuit and calls for a consumer boycott against Shell, are important tools in the North for forcing corporate responsibility for environmental damage and strengthening popular movements against destructive oil-drilling practices in other countries of the South.

The Clinton administration should abandon its policy of constructive dialogue. It must instead back an oil embargo, freeze Nigerian assets in the U.S., and work with the UN, OAU, and EU to impose other multilateral measures to further isolate and economically strangle the Abacha regime. Administration officials must also strongly condemn continuing assassinations and human rights abuses in Nigeria, including the murder of Kudirat Abiola, wife of the jailed president-elect.

By taking the lead in organizing an international oil boycott and other sanctions, the U.S. would demonstrate that it is willing to act upon broad democratic principles rather than out of narrow economic concerns.

The U.S. has yet to fully articulate a post-cold war policy towards Africa and many fear Africa will continue to be marginalized as the U.S. pushes its free trade and economic globalization agenda over development assistance, humanitarian aid, and conflict resolution and peacekeeping. If the Clinton administration acts boldly against the Abacha dictatorship, its policy towards Nigeria could become a model for reconstituting a policy of active engagement and support for democracy and human rights in Africa.

Furthermore, strong U.S. and international economic sanctions, a consumer boycott, and the lawsuit against Shell can bring to a head the long-standing environmental grievances between the Ogoni people, the oil companies, and the military regime. Shell has been pumping oil in Nigeria for nearly five decades. It has shunned all social responsibility and given little or nothing back to the area from which it is deriving enormous profits. Shell should be held responsible for repairing the environmental and human damage done in Ogoniland.

An effective consumer boycott and embargo will not only send a message to Shell but will also help to strengthen struggles by indigenous peoples in Ecuador's Amazon Basin and elsewhere against destruction of their homelands by oil companies.

Written by Cece Modupé Fadopé, a Washington, DC journalist who produces and hosts a weekly radio public affairs program, African Perspectives.

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World Wide Web:

For information about Shell boycott and lawsuit
<http://www.sierraclub.org/saro-wiwa>

Concerned African Scholars
<http://www.prairienet.org/acas/siro.html>

Coalition Against Dictatorship in Nigeria
<http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/org/nigeria>

Nigerian Democratic Movement
<http://www.cldc.howard.edu>

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