

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Academy for Genocide Prevention

**Monitoring Roundtable: West Africa**

**4 March 2005**

*In a two-hour session at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, academic experts and USG officials from the State Department (S/CRS and AF), USAID, and CIA discussed potential threats of atrocities and crimes against humanity stemming from ethnic and sectarian conflicts in West Africa, principally Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire.*

*In Central and Northern Nigeria, resource conflicts and declining incomes have exacerbated chronic tensions that have been manipulated by leaders invoking ethnic and religious identities.. Periodic violent clashes have occurred in Adamawa State and Plateau State—where as many as 53,000 have been killed by ethnic violence since 1999—and other parts of the country. Several upcoming events could exacerbate ethnic strife by upsetting the balance of power between Nigeria's predominantly Christian South and its predominantly Muslim North. These include recommendations on constitutional change emanating from the ongoing National Political Reform Dialogue in Abuja, the impending 2005 census, and the 2007 national elections.*

*In Côte d'Ivoire, ethnic and religious tensions have been amplified by rapid population increases, shortages of arable land, and falling standards of living. Despite the French military presence in the country, violent outbreaks continue in both north and south. A precipitous withdrawal of French troops from Côte d'Ivoire could spark an explosion of Christian-Muslim violence resulting in several hundred thousand deaths.*

**Conflict Drivers**

Speakers at the roundtable noted that, across much of the Sahel, demographic and economic pressures are exacerbating ethnic and sectarian strife. In Nigeria, family incomes have declined by two-thirds since 1990, according to the World Bank, so that the average Nigerian's real income is lower today than at the achievement of Nigerian independence in 1960—before the development of the oil fields in the Delta. Nigeria's population continues to grow rapidly and is projected to double—from 137 million to over 260 million—by 2025. The resulting competition over arable land has been intensified by droughts that have forced northern pastoralists to move their herds south, causing clashes with indigenous farmers. In Côte d'Ivoire, the country's economic success from the 1950s through the 1980s attracted large numbers of immigrants from

Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, and elsewhere in the Sahel. Since the 1980s, economic stagnation and continuing population growth have led to growing immiseration.

Conflicts stemming from the competition over resources—including, in the case of Nigeria, the country's vast oil reserves—have been manipulated by some local and national leaders to fuel ethnic and religious strife. On the national level in Nigeria, oil (whose recent elevated prices resulted in \$20 billion of windfall profits during the first nine months of 2004 alone) is the center of a particularly high-stakes competition, because access to oil revenues is determined largely by proximity to political power.

In Côte d'Ivoire, discriminatory policies against immigrants and their descendants, who are for the most part Muslims, were adopted in the 1990s and were exacerbated by President Laurent Gbagbo (a convert to evangelical Christianity) in disallowing a northern candidate to run for the presidency. This has provoked a cycle of retaliatory violence over land and other issues, resulting in the deaths of 10-15,000 people beginning in September 2002. While the source of the conflict is not religious, the religious divide could lead to it taking on that coloration. The deployment of French peacekeeping troops has prevented the further escalation of violence, but Ivoirian political leaders continue to incite ethnic and sectarian hostilities. The "Jeunes Patriotes," President and Mrs. Gbagbo's personal youth militia, have repeatedly slaughtered hundreds of people in districts of Abidjan populated mainly by immigrants and northerners. Gbagbo is also reportedly recruiting demobilized child soldiers from Liberia to fight for him in the west. The danger to civilians has escalated to the point that the UK has now closed its embassy in Abidjan and advised British nationals to leave Côte d'Ivoire.

### **Tripwires**

Across West Africa, the ability to resolve peacefully deeply rooted conflicts, especially between ethnic groups and between Christian and Muslim communities is critical for political stability. Thus, any developments that threaten to upset the existing balance of power between them, or to seriously cripple one or another's future prospects, have the potential to spark widespread violence.

In Nigeria, three upcoming events warrant close monitoring:

- The outcome of the National Political Reform Dialogue (NPRD), which opened in Abuja in February 2005. The NPRD includes 220 Christian and 150 Muslim delegates, favoring President Obasanjo's ruling party, and has resulted in complaints from opposition parties, based principally in the North. The composition of the NPRD reflects the outcome of the 2003 election, which has been challenged in court. So far, opposition leaders, such as Muhammadu Buhari of the ANPP, have urged their followers to respect the judicial process. Should the courts fail to deliver a decision that is perceived as impartial, however, or should Obasanjo override a judicial verdict, some Muslim elements might feel further marginalized and encourage unrest or even a return to military rule.

- The national census scheduled for 2005. No successful census has been conducted in Nigeria since 1963—largely because any census has the potential to reapportion power between Muslim and Christians—and all attempted censuses since then have been accompanied by political violence.
- The 2007 national elections. The last two elections were widely perceived to have been manipulated by the ruling party. Should Obasanjo refuse to give up power in 2007, or should a corrupt electoral process transfer power to another Southern Christian, rather than a Northern Muslim, civil strife could result. A seriously flawed election could weaken the capacity to rule of any elected president, whether from north or south.

In Côte d'Ivoire, sporadic killing and atrocities continue to occur. The economic crisis and ethnic tensions have deteriorated to such an extent that a stable peace is unlikely in the near future. Participants in the session warned that, under the current fragile conditions, the departure of French peacekeeping troops would likely spark a massive escalation of sectarian violence throughout the country.

### **Opportunities for Engagement**

The panelists noted that the stability of both Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire is critical for security across West Africa. Not only is Nigeria the richest and most populous nation in the region, it has played a leadership role in the African Union and in peacekeeping missions in Liberia, Sudan, and elsewhere. In Côte d'Ivoire, a renewed civil war could spill over into neighboring states including Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, all of which also confront serious economic crises.

Participants in the session observed that the international community needs both short-term “operational” and long-term “structural” strategies for preventing violent conflict in the region. Operational strategies would include providing support for reform efforts by national political leaders who are working in good faith; and conversely, containing the damage caused by “egregious leaders” through the involvement of regional institutions such as ECOWAS and the African Union, as well as Western governments.

The panelists judged Nigeria's Obasanjo to be a leader who deserves support for his efforts at economic, police, and judicial reform and who has pledged to support electoral reform. (Indeed, the U.S. is currently devoting significant Economic Support Funds for Nigerian electoral reform.) At the same time, panelists said that U.S. diplomats need to convey several clear messages to Obasanjo both privately and (where appropriate) through public communications:

- It would be disastrous for him to support a change in the constitution to permit him to run for a third term.
- The independence and impartiality of the judiciary is critical for the success of Nigerian democracy.

- Electoral reform in advance of the 2007 election is critical to Nigeria's long term stability

For Côte d'Ivoire, where the current presidential term expires in October 2005 and the terms for members of parliament expire in November, panelists argued that elections must be conducted under international control (as is the case for the upcoming elections in Togo). Panelists also emphasized the critical need for France to maintain its peacekeeping force in Côte d'Ivoire, because neither ECOWAS nor the UN would be able to deploy a sufficient military force to control the fighting.

For both countries, the required structural changes (economic development, reconstructing civil society, security sector reform, etc.) are all much longer term projects that will require decades of sustained and coordinated effort. Participants noted that no comprehensive list exists of U.S. government programs—not to mention programs of other donor governments, international institutions, corporations, and NGOs—directed toward fostering such structural changes. Creating an inventory of all external economic resources directed toward a given country would be a useful step toward a coordinated strategy for fostering development and sound governance.