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**NIGERIA
A SECOND CHANCE?**

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Current Situation

As the outgoing military strongman General Abdulsalami Abubakar delivered his farewell speech minutes before handing over power to Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria's first elected president in fifteen years, he declared 29 May 1999 the second most important day in the country's history after independence from Britain on 1 October 1960. It marked a vital new chance for Nigeria to put behind it the years of corruption, incompetence and sometimes brutal military rule that have shattered the dreams of Africa's most populous nation and one of its potential economic powers. The ceremony capped a remarkable turnaround in Nigeria's fortunes that began with the sudden death of the late dictator General Sani Abacha on 8 June 1998 and the equally shocking demise of Moshood Abiola, the man widely believed to have won the annulled June 1993 presidential election. In less than a year, hundreds of political prisoners had been released, a series of elections from the local to the presidential level held, and now a civilian leader was to be sworn in. The presence at the inauguration of 30 heads of state and dignitaries such as Nelson Mandela and former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt signaled that Nigeria had shaken off its status as international pariah.

When Obasanjo stepped to the podium, he declared in a forthright inaugural address his commitment to banish military rule and to make government work for Nigeria's 110 million people. He promised an end to corruption, which he described as a "full-blown cancer", greater transparency, re-establishment of the rule of law, and a better deal for Nigeria's restive ethnic minorities. As he spoke, however, a full-scale riot erupted in the parking lot behind the Eagle Square parade ground as soldiers, policemen, and hundreds of civilians looted lorries full of inauguration day paraphernalia such as drinking mugs and tee shirts. The contrasting scenes of an uplifting glamorous ceremony and an eruption of chaos, taking place within 50 yards of each other in full view of the world's media and dozens of foreign visitors, symbolized the potentially violent tensions simmering just below the surface of the new political order.

The days leading up to the inauguration provided a timely reminder of the perils on Nigeria's road to stability and economic prosperity. The traditional trouble spots, Lagos, the sprawling commercial centre, the oil-rich Niger Delta and the cauldron of ethnic minorities in the Middle Belt region were once again becoming extremely tense. Riots broke out in Lagos on the night of 17 May after rumours, fanned by a Christian fundamentalist preacher, spread that Obasanjo had died mysteriously in the manner of Abacha and Abiola. Five days later in the heart of the Middle Belt, violence flared anew in the town of Kafanchan between Hausa Muslims and minority ethnic groups, when the state government attempted to install the new Hausa Emir, Alhaji Isa Muhammadu Mohammed, whose father had died the previous November. Shops and houses, including the Emir's palace, were burned and dozens of people were wounded when the minorities objected to the state government's failure to recognize their own chief in Kafanchan.

In the oil-producing town of Warri in the Niger Delta, a new spiral of brutality between Itsekiris and Ijaws claimed up to 200 lives.¹

The return of constitutional government means that Nigerians are now governed by elected representatives ranging from local governments to state governors and assemblies, and finally to a National Assembly, comprising the 360-member House of Representatives and a 109-seat Senate, and the presidency.

Real power in the new civilian administration, however, is held by a handful of retired generals headed by Obasanjo himself. The other former generals who constitute the pillars of the new regime include Defence Minister Theophilus Danjuma, National Security Adviser Aliyu Mohammed Gusau and the presidential chief of staff Abdullahi Mohammed, who served as the security adviser under General Abubakar. All four men played prominent roles in the military regime of 1976-1979, also headed by Obasanjo, which ultimately became the first to hand over power to an elected administration. General Abubakar's short-lived government was the second.

1.2 Overview of Recent Developments

In the brief period since his inauguration, Obasanjo has witnessed a series of localized upheavals in which up to 500 people have died.² In mid-July, clashes broke out in the southern town of Shagamu between Yoruba residents and Hausa immigrants. The violence was sparked by the killing of a Hausa woman who allegedly broke local convention by watching traditional Yoruba Oro religious ceremonies. Up to 60 people were killed, and the arrival of wounded Hausas in the notoriously volatile northern city of Kano prompted Hausas to begin attacking Yorubas in their midst. Up to 70 people were killed, and hundreds of Yorubas were forced to flee the city.³

Trouble has continued in the oil-producing southeastern region, both in Warri and within the delta itself where militant Ijaw youths have continued their low-level campaign of sabotage of petroleum installations and kidnapping of oil workers. The unrest has frequently cut the production of the biggest petroleum company, Shell, by up to one quarter. Oil companies sent a warning to the Obasanjo administration in late July that they feared the militants were planning new attacks.⁴ The disruption of oil production has sent world prices soaring, however, and increased Nigeria's export earnings by some US\$300 million per month.⁵ Dependent on petroleum exports for 97 per cent of its foreign exchange earnings, the Nigerian economy will remain hostage to the vicissitudes of the international oil market for the foreseeable future. A US\$4 billion natural gas project is scheduled to come on stream by the end of 1999 and could earn Nigeria an additional US\$1 billion, over and above its current oil export earnings of some US\$9 billion.

¹ For the early history of the Warri crisis, see Karl Maier, *Nigeria: The Permanent Transition* (WRITENET for UNHCR/CDR, 1997) (UNHCR/CDR REFWORLD Databases), Section 5. 2: "The New Delta Wars"

² Reuters [Lagos], Mathew Tostevin. "Nigeria Ethnic Clashes Are Dangerous Sign", 26 July 1999

³ Reuters [Kano], Mike Oboh, "Yorubas Flee Northern Nigeria City after Riots", 27 July 1999

⁴ Reuters [Abuja], "Nigeria Oil Firms Fear New Disruptions near Warri", 30 July 1999

⁵ Reuters [Lagos], Mathew Tostevin, "Oil Price Rise Mixed Blessing for Nigeria", 14 July 1999

Overall, however, the economic panorama is a sombre one. A huge spending spree by the outgoing Abubakar administration left the country's foreign reserves in a perilous state and its budget deficit for 1999 has been projected at a massive US\$2.7 billion.⁶ Nigeria is currently ranked among the poorest countries in the world. Living standards are believed to be below those of 1970, before the beginning of the oil boom. Nigeria would need brisk economic growth over the next 10 to 15 years to approximate those of the early independence era. Prospects for rapid and stable economic growth, however, are dim. President Obasanjo has asked the international community to cancel a substantial portion of Nigeria's US\$29 billion foreign debt.

While both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have pledged to consider new credits to Nigeria, they will only do so if the Obasanjo government establishes a track record on several key issues - budget restraint, anti-corruption measures, privatization, and flexibility on the exchange rate. Nigerian officials have pledged to put the economy on a sound free market footing but have suggested that full-scale privatization of public utilities and state-owned companies might not occur until the end of the year 2001.

On 27 July President Obasanjo presented a revised budget to the National Assembly, predicting a deficit nearly 90 per cent lower than that forecast by the outgoing military administration. Some Nigerian economists fear, however, that President Obasanjo and his top economic advisers remain wedded to a model of nationalist economic theory - which holds that the state can run efficiently if managed by patriots - that his previous military administration pursued in the 1970s. As evidence of this trend, they point to the reintroduction in early July of subsidies for fertilizer and the announcement by Power and Steel Minister Bola Ige that the Government should finish construction of the US\$5 billion Ajaokuta steel plant, which has so far registered no production and is seen by many as a stark symbol of mismanagement and corruption.⁷

Nevertheless, in his first months in office, President Obasanjo has moved quickly on several important fronts. He has retired up to 150 military officers who held political offices under the previous regimes. New appointments to military command positions have generally favoured officers from the central and southern parts of the country and reduced the preponderance of northerners in the senior ranks.⁸ Defence Minister Danjuma has announced plans to reduce the size of the armed forces from 80,000 to 50,000 and to rebuild and retrain the military with help from the United States.⁹ The four-year programme would mark the biggest reduction in the armed forces since the aftermath of the 1967-1970 civil war.

Obasanjo has vowed that there will be "no sacred cows" in his bid to root out corruption, which affects almost every aspect of life in Nigeria. He has introduced anti-corruption legislation and suspended controversial oil contracts awarded by the Abubakar government on the eve of its departure from office. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) has issued new guidelines barring middlemen from obtaining contracts for oil sales.¹⁰ In mid-August oil traders announced that the NNPC

⁶ *Africa Confidential* [London], "Golden Parachutes", Vol. 40, No. 10 (14 May 1999), p. 3

⁷ Reuters [Lagos], 14 July 1999

⁸ *The Financial Times*, William Wallis, "Nigeria Purges Officers in Army Shake-up", 23 July 1999

⁹ Reuters [Lagos], Mathew Tostevin, "Nigeria Aims to Cut Armed Forces by Third", 19 August 1999

¹⁰ *The Financial Times*, "Nigeria Tightens Oil Trade Rules", 7 July 1999

Managing Director Jackson Gaius-Obaseki had effectively eliminated commissions on oil sales earned by middlemen.¹¹ The commissions, sometimes worth up to 15 US cents per barrel, were a major means of corruption that cost the country hundreds of millions of dollars. A new government committee is to investigate shady business deals under military rule.

In his inaugural address, Obasanjo listed the crisis in the oil-producing areas as his number one priority. At the end of June he presented a bill to the National Assembly calling for the creation of a Niger Delta Development Commission and an increase in the share of oil revenues that remain in the area from 3 to 13 per cent.

Without doubt, the human rights outlook, which just a year ago ranked among the poorest on the continent, has brightened remarkably. The Abubakar regime released the bulk of the country's political prisoners. The new constitution, which was approved in the final days of military rule, guarantees freedom of expression and the independence of the judiciary. The major human rights organizations, such as the Civil Liberties Organization and the Constitutional Rights Project, have filled the space allowed them by the new order. The Transitional Monitoring Group, comprising seasoned human rights campaigners, fielded up to 10,000 monitors during the election period. The Government also set up commissions headed by respected personalities to investigate human rights abuses and act as a sort of Truth Commission.

President Obasanjo's decision to establish a seven-member human rights commission symbolizes the dramatic turnaround in Nigeria's rights situation. General Abubakar set the stage for the rapid improvement by releasing several hundred political prisoners held by General Abacha. On the eve of his hand-over to President Obasanjo, Abubakar announced the repeal of notorious military decrees used against dissidents. On 28 May he revoked Decree 2 of 1984, which allowed detention without trial. The human rights panel, which is headed by the respected former Supreme Court Justice, Chukwudifu Oputa, is to investigate human rights abuses since the last civilian government was overthrown in 1983. "You will help us scale over an unprecedented wicked and oppressive era in our history", Obasanjo said while inaugurating the panel on 14 June. The commission includes human rights lawyer Tunji Abayomi, who was jailed under General Abacha, and Father Mathew Kukah, the Secretary General of the Catholic Bishops Conference.

By late August, the panel had received 1,500 petitions from members of the public requesting investigation of human rights abuses.¹² The panel is to identify the people or institutions responsible for violations. An important part of its goal is to provide Nigerians with a healing process by airing in public significant cases of human rights violations. Both victims and the alleged perpetrators are to be called to testify. The panel is to sit in public and hold its hearings in several parts of the country.

Prominent opponents of the former military government began returning home in the latter part of 1998. These included the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, who under General Abacha had been condemned for treason, and Ledum Mitee, the acting president of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). On 14

¹¹ Reuters [London], "Traders Keep Nigeria Oil Sales but Commissions End", 17 August 1999
¹² [Nigeria Today](#), "[Rights Panel Receives 1,500 Petitions](#)", 30 August 1999

June 1999, President Obasanjo met with long-time exile Dr Owens Wiwa during which he promised to release the remains of his brother, Ken Saro-Wiwa, whom General Abacha ordered executed in November 1995.¹³

Since then, hundreds of Nigerian exiles have been returning home, if only in some cases temporarily. The establishment of a civilian administration, moreover, has nullified asylum claims on the basis of political persecution. Western diplomatic sources in Lagos confirm that many asylum seekers in their countries are withdrawing their applications.¹⁴

A reinvigorated civil society has made its voice heard too, with the press forcing the resignation of the speaker of the House of Representatives Salisu Buhari and an investigation into the Senate President Evan Enwerem. Buhari had no option but to step down after the Lagos-based magazine, *The News*, revealed that he had lied about his age and academic qualifications.¹⁵ One thousand protesters, organized by the Nigeria Labour Congress, besieged the National Assembly in mid-August to protest the Government's decision to provide hefty allowances for House members and Senators to purchase furniture while most Nigerians live in abject poverty.¹⁶

President Obasanjo appears poised to carry out one of his key election pledges and withdraw the 12,000-strong Nigerian contingent in the West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, from Sierra Leone, thanks to the peace pact of 7 July between President Tejan Kabbah's government and the rebel alliance of the Revolutionary United Front and the former Sierra Leonean Army. However popular Nigeria's leading role in peacekeeping operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone has been with the international community, at home its military involvement has received increasing criticism among a populace that believes Nigeria can no longer afford foreign military adventures. Nigeria's stark economic reality made a withdrawal likely even before the announcement of the Sierra Leone peace deal.

Despite the outbreaks of ethnic violence and lingering questions about the mandate he earned in the February elections that were marred by widespread vote rigging, President Obasanjo is currently enjoying a honeymoon period. Most Nigerians believe his administration represents the last chance to establish a stable political system and economy and avoid the break up of the country. The new government's moves to reshuffle the army high command and to investigate corruption and human rights abuses have provided some necessary breathing space, as have the unexpectedly high oil prices on the economic front. But unless the economy improves and there is quick movement to end the worsening strife in the Niger delta, President Obasanjo could face an intensification of demands to restructure Nigeria into a confederation of regions or, more worryingly, independent nations. Few analysts believe that such a drastic redrawing of the political map could be carried out peacefully.

¹³ [Nigeria Today](#), "[Obasanjo Says Remains of Saro-Wiwa to Be Released](#)", 21 June 1999

¹⁴ [The Guardian \[Lagos\]](#), [Moses Ayo Jolayemi](#), "[Nigerians Shun Asylum Embrace Home Coming](#)", 31 August 1999

¹⁵ Reuters [Abuja], Musa Ubale, "Nigeria Senate President Denies Conviction", 5 August 1999

¹⁶ Reuters [Abuja], "More than 1,000 Protest at Nigerian Assembly", 10 August 1999

2. AN AILING ECONOMY

2.1 A Bankrupt Inheritance

By all accounts, Nigeria is considerably poorer than it was twenty years ago when the then General Obasanjo relinquished power to the elected administration of President Shehu Shagari. The inflow of some US\$280 billion since the oil boom began in the early 1970s has been wasted on corruption and mismanagement. The foreign debt stands at some US\$29 billion, and per capita Gross Domestic Product is estimated by the Economist Intelligence Unit at US\$264, making Nigeria one of the 20 poorest nations in the world.¹⁷ The national currency, the naira, has collapsed in value from more than US\$1 to one US cent.

On the eve of President Obasanjo's inauguration, officials of his People's Democratic Party voiced concern that by the time they reached office, they would find an empty treasury. In fact, a spending spree by the outgoing military administration saw foreign exchange reserves plummet from US\$6.7 billion to US\$4 billion in the first quarter alone and the budget deficit swell to some US\$670 million, twice as big as the Abubakar government had projected for the entire year.¹⁸ IMF and World Bank officials described the spending as "extra-budgetary expenditure", the perennial bane of Nigeria. Some independent observers described the massive expenditures as merely a golden handshake for the outgoing military authorities, both at the state and federal level, while others hinted darkly at a conspiracy to undermine the civilian administration before it even took office.

The unexpected rise in world oil prices, from US\$10 per barrel at the start of 1999 to more than US\$17 by mid year, has helped to cover the burgeoning financial gap. The outlook is brightened further by the start of liquefied gas exports scheduled for the end of the year that could bring in about US\$1 billion per annum. But economic growth in 1999 is likely to be extremely sluggish at just over 1 per cent of GDP, less than half of the country's population growth rate.¹⁹

2.2 Conflicting Demands

President Obasanjo faces conflicting demands from his two main constituencies: international creditors and the Nigerian people. Obasanjo has repeatedly urged foreign creditors to help establish Nigerian democracy by wiping off at least some of the country's foreign debt. The IMF, whose stamp of approval Nigeria needs to begin talks with Western creditors, says it is prepared to reach a new loan agreement worth US\$1 billion provided the Government moves quickly to introduce market reforms. These would include cutting the budget deficit, and privatizing ailing state-owned companies, on which the state is spending some US\$2 billion in annual subsidies.

¹⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Nigeria: Country Risk Assessment: Main Report, 2nd Quarter 1999* (London, 1999), p. 2

¹⁸ *Africa Confidential*

¹⁹ Economist Intelligence Unit, p. 1

A solid track record on meeting commitments is considered vital by the IMF. A previous standby arrangement reached between Nigeria and IMF in January fell apart because of Abubakar's last-minute spending bonanza and failure to meet agreed privatization schedules. Finance Minister Adamu Ciroma has rejected a British proposal for IMF officials to monitor Nigeria's finances from within the Central Bank as "politically unacceptable".²⁰

The sell off of state-owned companies will provide a major new departure for Obasanjo, since his previous administration acquired many of the companies during the 1970s when state-led development was in vogue. Several of his ministers, including Power and Steel Minister Bola Ige, have in the recent past voiced hostility to the sale of what they consider the nation's patrimony to Nigerian businessmen who they believe acquired their wealth by illegal means. "You see the people who are now mouthing privatize, they are looking for ways in which they can invest their stolen money", Ige said in December 1998. "It is not they are anxious that those things should work better. It is that they want to buy government established companies at lower rates than they should be. They just want to invest their ill-got gains there. So it is not privatization; it is looting."²¹

In recent months, however, government officials have taken pains to declare their commitment to privatization and to the free market reforms. Finance Minister Ciroma said in August that all macro-economic policies would be designed to establish free market economics and that privatization of the Nigerian Electrical Power Authority (NEPA) and the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited would take place by the end of 2001.²² Vice President Atiku Abubakar has announced that the first phase of privatization will be complete when the Government sells off public quoted companies, including banks, cement and oil marketing firms, by the end of 1999.²³

The revised budget presented in July, which saw the projected deficit cut from US\$2.7 billion to just US\$260 million for the year, marked a good first step on the road to reform. But the Government's decision to approve US\$15.4 million as a furniture allowance for the 469 members of the National Assembly, roughly between US\$25,000-35,000 each, has provoked a storm of opposition in a country where the minimum monthly wage stands at approximately US\$30.²⁴ There are bound to be question marks too over the allocation to an ill-defined contingency fund called "Service-Wide Voices" which is to consume 20,042,535,483 Naira, or nearly US\$200 million, or about as much as Health and Education combined.

The challenge for the Obasanjo administration will be to use its limited resources wisely. Faced with severely crumbling roads and electrical power systems, health facilities and schools at all levels, it will need to spend to rebuild a collapsed economic infrastructure and improve the living standards of its people.

²⁰ *The Financial Times* [London], William Wallis, "Nigeria Rejects IMF Internal Bank Check", 3 August 1999

²¹ Bola Ige, Lagos. Personal interview, 5 December 1998

²² Dow Jones [Lagos], "Nigeria to Privatize Electricity, Telecoms by End 2001", 5 August 5, 1999

²³ Reuters [Abuja], Bale Musa, "First Phase of Nigerian Privatisation by Year End", 12 July 1999

²⁴ Reuters [Abuja], 10 August 1999

3. ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS TENSIONS RISING

3.1 Traditional Hot Spots Flare Anew

On the eve of Obasanjo's inauguration, Nigeria witnessed a series of outbreaks of violence that left some observers wondering whether the installation of civilian rule was akin to lifting the lid on a cauldron of boiling religious and ethnic tensions, allowing them to spill over. In truth, such eruptions have occurred both under military and civilian governments during Nigeria's 39 years of independence.

So far, the violence has remained fairly restricted and involved hundreds, rather than thousands of people. Those displaced by such local conflicts have found shelter either with relatives in their ethnic areas of origin or in nearby police and military barracks. Many of the Hausas displaced by the recent fighting in Shagamu returned to Kano, and Yoruba victims in Kano fled to southwestern towns such as Ibadan and Osogbo. In late August there were reports that the officials at the Bukavu army barracks in Kano were forcing Yorubas displaced by the recent violence and sheltering with the army to return to their homes. The displaced, in turn, have demanded that Yoruba leaders in Kano provide them with money and transport to return to southwestern Nigeria.²⁵

The vast traditional extended family and community networks continue to play the predominant role in caring for internally displaced, whether in Kano, Kafanchan or the Niger Delta. This has historically been the case and the practice has been strengthened in recent years with the weakening of the services offered by the central and state governments. As long as the conflicts involved remain relatively localized, the extended family and community networks can probably cope, although at times under tremendous strain.

3.2 Extremism on the Rise

In recent years extremist groups have grown in strength in three key regions. In the North, Islamic fundamentalists have gained widespread support among the urban youth, particularly in the cities of Kano, Zaria and Kaduna, the traditional political capital of northern Nigeria. In the Niger Delta, Ijaw youth groups have captured the political initiative from their more conservative elders in what nearly all regard as a struggle against the central government and multinational oil companies. In southwestern Nigeria among the Yoruba people, a relatively new movement has sprung up known as the Oodua People's Congress. Its more extreme faction is actively pressing for secession from the rest of Nigeria and the establishment of an "Odudua Republic".

The renewed explosion of violence in the south eastern oil producing region around the city of Warri testifies to the deep ethnic and political tensions that President Obasanjo must tackle on an urgent basis. Years of political and economic neglect in the Niger delta, which provides more than half of Nigeria's daily 2 million barrels in oil production, have left large areas of the region in a state of near anarchy. The majority Ijaw population has been deeply disturbed by conflicts among its own people, against neighbouring ethnic groups such as the Itsekirri, and against Western

²⁵ [P.M. News \[Lagos\]. "Soldiers Throw Out Kano Riot Victims", 31 August 1999](#)

oil companies operating in their midst. Kidnappings of Nigerian and foreign oil workers, sabotage of oil pipelines, and outbreaks of violence particularly among the youth has caused significant loss of life and human displacement, and disturbance of economic development and oil production. Since oil exports account for 97 per cent of Nigeria's total foreign exchange earnings, reductions in output further erode the Government's ability to invest both in the delta and in badly needed development projects for health, education and jobs.

Smaller explosions of communal tension continued to occur in recent months in the politically volatile area of the "Middle Belt" region in central Nigeria, particularly in the states of Kaduna and Taraba, involving disputes over land, religion and political power.

3.3 Yoruba-Hausa Clashes

Nigeria has been largely spared from violence between members of its two biggest ethnic groups, the mainly Muslim Hausa-Fulani people of the North and the Yorubas, who have Christian, Muslim and animist adherents in the Southwest. The groups have been traditional rivals in what is today Nigeria since the turn of the nineteenth century when the Fulani Muslim leader, Shehu Usman dan Fodio, launched his Islamic *jihad* in northern Nigeria. The Fulanis battled Yoruba warriors loyal to the Oyo Empire for control of Ilorin, until they finally captured the city.

Some scholars believe that disunity within the Yoruba ranks allowed the Fulanis to hold the city.²⁶ Since then, the rivalry has been confined mainly to the political realm, and the two groups united during the 1967-1970 civil war to put down the attempt by Nigeria's third biggest group, the Igbos, to secede and establish the independent nation of Biafra. Ethnic violence in Kano has been limited to fighting between the Hausa-Fulanis and the Igbos.²⁷

In July there was a new turn to the pattern of conflict, however, when full-scale riots broke out in the southwestern town of Shagamu between the Yoruba majority and Hausa-Fulani immigrants, some of whom have lived in the area for generations. Within days, the violence spread to the northern city of Kano where for the first time in recent memory, Hausa attacked Yoruba immigrants in retaliation for the events in Shagamu, a traditional centre of the trade in kola nuts (a mild stimulant), situated 36 miles north of Lagos, where on 17 July 1999, a Hausa woman was murdered when she was caught watching traditional Yoruba rites known as Oro. There is a strong taboo against women witnessing the religious ceremonies involved in Oro. The killing of the woman sparked three days of riots which claimed the lives of up to 60 people, including at least one Yoruba who was mistaken for a Hausa because of the way he was dressed.²⁸ Dozens of homes, shops, mosques and market stalls were burned to the ground in the mainly Hausa quarter known as Sabo. The arrival of Hausa victims of the Shagamu clashes in Kano provoked a wave of retaliation on 22 July against Yoruba residents in which up to 70 people were killed, dozens were wounded, and hundreds were driven from their homes.²⁹ The violence was carried out largely by

²⁶ Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber, 1962), p. 94

²⁷ Karl Maier, *Nigeria: The Permanent Transition*, Section 6.3: "The Religious Mix and the Case of the City of Kano"

²⁸ Reuters [Shagamu], Dulue Mbachu, "Toll Reaches 60 in Nigerian Ethnic Clashes", 19 July 1999

²⁹ Reuters [Kano], 27 July 1999

unemployed street youth known locally as *Yan Daba*, or “sons of evil” in the Hausa language. The *Yan Daba* form an amorphous mass which is believed to respond at times to calls by Muslim fundamentalist groups, such as the *Ja’amutu Tajidmul Islami*, or the Movement for Islamic Revival, when street action is considered necessary.

Ironically, some analysts said the gradual disappearance of the biting fuel shortages - *Yan Daba* are heavily involved in the black market petrol trade - had created an increased sense of frustration among the unemployed youths.³⁰ During his tour of the battle areas in a plea for calm President Obasanjo said the violence had been “highly instigated” by unnamed opponents of the new civilian administration.³¹

Other observers attributed the events in Shagamu and Kano and other ethnic clashes elsewhere to growing frustration with the years of economic decline, the slow pace of change and the weakness of the central government. “Because the Nigerian State is so fragile, we will be faced with these bush fires for some time to come,” said Father Mathew Kukah, Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria.³²

3.4 Yoruba Militants Restive

The annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential elections, and thus the denial of the highest political office to the millionaire businessman Moshood Abiola, intensified frustration among the Yoruba which the rise of Obasanjo, also a Yoruba, has calmed to a limited extent.³³ Yoruba militants and moderates alike attributed General Ibrahim Babangida’s decision to block Abiola’s election victory to the fact that Abiola was a Yoruba. Many still firmly believe that the late Yoruba political champion, Obafemi Awolowo, was denied his chance to serve as president in the 1979 and 1983 elections, not because he lost the vote, but because he was a Yoruba and was thus prevented from assuming office. Since the 1993 debacle, they have begun openly to speak of seceding from Nigeria and establishing their own Oodua Republic. According to Yoruba legend, *Odùduwà* was sent down from the heavens by his father, the supreme God *Olódùmarè*, to found the earth.

The most radical of the pan-Yoruba movements, the Oodua People’s Congress, or OPC, was formed in August 1995 under the leadership of a 62-year-old physician, Dr Frederick Fasehun, who runs a hospital in the Mushin district of Lagos. The OPC draws the bulk of its membership from jobless university graduates and the vast reservoir of unemployed youth in Lagos, Ibadan and other Yoruba towns. Many of its supporters were activists in the pro-democracy protests after the annulment of the 1993 election in which up to 150 people were killed by the police.³⁴

Dr Fasehun was arrested by the Abacha government in December 1996 and spent 19 months in jail, but the OPC retreated underground. By the time he emerged from prison a few weeks after General Abacha’s death in June 1998, the OPC had spread

³⁰ *The Financial Times* [London], William Wallis, “Nigerians Flee Ethnic Violence”, 30 July 1999

³¹ *Nigeria Today*, “Obasanjo Blames Opponents for Violence”, 11 August 1999

³² Mathew Kukah, Secretary, Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria. Telephone interview, 4 August 1999

³³ On the 1993 election, see Karl Maier, *Nigeria: The Permanent Transition*, Section 2. 2: “Army Arrangement”

³⁴ Karl Maier, *Nigeria: The Permanent Transition*, Section 4. 1: “The Campaign for Democracy”

throughout the southwestern region across the nine states with significant Yoruba populations. Today the OPC claims a membership of 2.5 million organized in 400 cells in 150 local governments, though such figures are impossible to verify.³⁵ But in recent years its members have been involved in a spectacular series of running battles with the police. The OPC has become particularly notorious in Lagos because of its use of traditional “juju” medicine in the form of white handkerchiefs that its followers believe protect them from bullets. OPC activists also create small “magic” explosives made from eggshells filled with sulfuric acid.

Since the demise of General Abacha and the introduction of the new civilian order, the OPC has suffered a major split between followers of Dr Fasehun and a more radical faction led by Ganiyu Adams, a 29-year-old former cabinetmaker. Dr Fasehun, who is supported by the Campaign for Democracy president Beko Ransome-Kuti, calls the OPC a “socio-cultural organization” dedicated to promoting Yoruba interests peacefully.³⁶ Adams rejects such labels and says that violence is inevitable if Nigeria is to find justice. “You can’t give birth to a child without blood. If there is no bloodshed, this country cannot believe in justice.”³⁷

Both factions say their aim is to restructure Nigeria so that the country is run not as a centralized state as presently but as a federation in which each region and ethnic group would have control over its own resources and police forces. They also support calls from more conservative Yoruba movements, such as the Alliance for Democracy and *Afenifere*, for a “sovereign national conference” to redesign Nigeria. But Adams in particular criticizes the traditional Yoruba leadership as “traitors”.³⁸

The split between the two men began in December 1998 when a Lagos newspaper reported on a meeting between Fasehun and the then presidential candidate Obasanjo.³⁹ Adams’ faction expelled Fasehun for selling out the Yoruba cause while Fasehun’s supporters ejected Adams for provoking unnecessary confrontations with the police. Two days after President Obasanjo’s election victory on 27 February, the Adams faction armed itself with petrol bombs and magic explosive and engaged in clashes with police in the Isolo and Mushin districts of Lagos. Adams blames the police for provoking the action. Several policemen, OPC members, and bystanders were killed in the melee, and at least one police station was burned down.⁴⁰

Despite their differences, Adams shares with Fasehun an ambiguous position regarding President Obasanjo’s administration. On the one hand he describes Obasanjo as a pawn of the retired northern generals, who is incapable of making the necessary changes to give Nigeria a new direction. “As soon as the government makes a mistake, the people will take advantage and strike”, he warns. But should Obasanjo die while in power, Nigeria would collapse into three independent nations, led by the Hausa-Fulani, the Yorubas and the Igbos. “That is the end of Nigeria take it or leave it.”⁴¹

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Dr Frederick Fasehun, Lagos. Personal interview, 18 May 1999

³⁷ Ganiyu Adams, Lagos. Personal interview, 4 June 1999

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *P.M. News* [Lagos], “Obasanjo Woos Oodua Leader”, 8 December 1998

⁴⁰ *P.M. News* [Lagos], “Lagos Boils over Obasanjo”, 2 March 1999

⁴¹ Ganiyu Adams, Lagos. Personal interview, 4 June 1999

3.5 Ilaje-Ijaw Clashes

Another flash point involving the Yorubas centres on the low intensity war between the Ilaje people, who speak the Yoruba language, and the Arogbo-Ijaws, a western branch of the Ijaws who form the biggest ethnic group in the Niger Delta. The two groups, who live as neighbours in the delta areas of Ondo State, 100 miles east of Lagos, have been fighting throughout the past year over land that is believed to be rich in oil and lies close to concessions owned by the Chevron Corporation. The rivalry first erupted on 19 September 1998 when hundreds of people were killed and thousands made homeless during a series of battles. Both sides claim to be the true owners of the area. At the end of July 1999, the Ilajes reportedly launched a series of raids against the Ijaws to re-capture villages held by the Ijaws since last year's troubles. Ilaje spokespersons claimed to have recaptured 51 out of the 68 villages and towns they had lost previously to the Ijaws.⁴²

Ijaw leaders in the area have accused the OPC of participating in the Ilaje attacks, which they claim have amounted to an attempted genocide by the Yorubas.⁴³ A prominent spokesman for the Ilaje, Chief Adewole Dimehin, who is a member of the Ilaje development committee, has said his people are prepared to fight to the bitter end for their return to their original homes. "We have had enough of suffering as refugees."⁴⁴

The Ondo State Governor Adebayo Adefarati announced on 17 August 1999 that the two sides were maintaining a cease-fire and were awaiting the arrival of naval troops to keep the peace.⁴⁵ He has urged the federal government to declare the region a disaster area.

3.6 Niger Delta Troubles Continue

The trouble between the Ilajes and the Ijaws is symptomatic of the wider unrest that has continued throughout the Niger Delta since the campaign by the minority Ogoni people in the early 1990s.⁴⁶

In his inaugural speech, President Obasanjo outlined priority areas for his new government and the crisis in the Niger Delta was the number one item. Even as he was speaking and taking a 21-gun salute, however, the opposing groups in the southeastern town of Warri engaged in street battles in which up to 200 people were killed.⁴⁷ The crisis involves the Ijaws, a smaller group called the Itsekiris who claim to be the original inhabitants of the area with a traditional chieftaincy that dates back to the fifteenth century, as well as their neighbours, the Urhobos. The crisis first erupted in 1997 when General Abacha moved a local government headquarters from

⁴² *The Vanguard* [Lagos], Dayo Johnson and Victor Ahiuma-Young, "Bloodletting Continues", 10 August 1999

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *The Vanguard*, Julius Alabi, "Ijaw, Ilaje Communities Embrace Truce", 18 August 1999

⁴⁶ For a history of the Niger Delta Crisis, see Karl Maier, *Nigeria: The Permanent Transition*, Sections 5.1: "The Ogoni Tragedy" and 5.2: "New Delta Wars", and Karl Maier, *Nigeria: A Troubled Transition* (WRITENET for UNCHR/CDR, 1999), Section 3: "Niger Delta Crisis Deepens"

⁴⁷ *The Financial Times* [London], William Wallis, "Nigerian Fighting Clouds Fresh Start and Raises Oil Fears, 24 June 1999

an Ijaw zone to one dominated by the Itsekiris.⁴⁸ The new round of fighting that took place in June was sparked by the movement of newly elected officials to take their offices in the re-drawn local government area. The Government deployed army troops and imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in the region on 7 June 1999 to cool down tensions, but in the days afterward illegal roadblocks mounted for the purposes of extortion and gunfire were routine.

Throughout the first several months of the Obasanjo administration, kidnappings of oil workers continued to take place. In late June a group calling itself “Enough is Enough” captured and held a helicopter belonging to a Royal/Dutch Shell sub-contractor and its two foreign crew members.⁴⁹

The ongoing disturbances forced Shell to declare *force majeure* in July, saying it could not meet its export commitments for the month. Shell produces nearly half of Nigeria’s 2 million barrel per day oil production. The measure was lifted on 10 August 1999.⁵⁰

In August, five Britons were kidnapped in two different operations. Two of the men were aboard a ship, the Askalad, when it was hijacked, and three more were working for a contractor of the U.S.-based Texaco Corporation.⁵¹ All five were eventually released. The Governor of Bayelsa State, Chief Diapreye Alamieyasaigha, has accused Nigerian workers employed by the oil companies of being behind the various kidnapping operations in an effort to get back at their companies.⁵² “Some of the incidents of kidnapping and hijacking of oil workers, expatriates and property of oil companies are masterminded by staff of these companies so that they could benefit from the ransom demanded by the perpetrators of these acts,” he said.

At the end of June, President Obasanjo presented a bill to the National Assembly to set up a Niger Delta Development Commission that would administer the increased proportion of oil revenues, from 3 to 13 per cent, that are to be spent in the region. The new bill could include a US\$500 million endowment fund for reparation for environmental damage. The legislators from the region, who have formed the Niger Delta Legislative Consultative Forum to push it through, say that only economic development can bring peace to the region.⁵³

A hint of a possible major breakthrough in the often troubled relations between the Ogoni people, whose leader Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed in 1995, and Shell appeared in August. Ogoni leaders meeting in the traditional Ogoni capital, Bori, appeared to give the go-ahead for talks by issuing a statement calling on Shell to negotiate only with MOSOP, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People.⁵⁴ The statement read: “Consistent with our avowed non-violent principles, it is hereby

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch Africa, *The Price of Oil, Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria’s Oil Producing Communities* (New York, February 1999), p. 112

⁴⁹ United Nations, Integrated Regional Information Network [Lagos], “Nigeria: Kidnappings Worry Oil Firms”, 5 July 1999

⁵⁰ Dow Jones [Lagos], “Force Majeure Lifted after 31 Days”, 9 August 1999

⁵¹ Reuters [Lagos], “One of Five Kidnapped Britons Released in Nigeria”, 11 August 1999

⁵² *The Guardian* [Lagos], “Alamieyasaigha Blames Oil Workers for Kidnappings”, 17 July 1999

⁵³ *The Guardian* [Lagos], “Legislators, Others Seek Amendment of Niger Delta Bill”, 18 August 1999

⁵⁴ *Nigerian Ogonis give go ahead for talks with Shell*, Reuters, Bori, August 14, 1999.

resolved that the only body with which Shell should dialogue on development projects in Ogoni, if it actually has the interest of our people at heart, is MOSOP.”

But frustration in the delta is palpable, and the Government must get the development commission up and running quickly. A typical example occurred on 18 August 1999. An estimated 1,000 youths attacked the offices of the oil firm Texaco Inc. in Warri. Reports said the youths smashed office windows and glass doors and locked the staff inside. They left a symbolic coffin outside the office entrance.⁵⁵

3.7 The Middle Belt

The Middle Belt is Nigeria’s most ethnically diverse region and home to over half of its 300 ethnic groups. As its name suggests, the Middle Belt stretches like a wide girdle across the central plateau region that separates the strongly Islamic cultures of the Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri people in the North from the mainly Christian Igbos in the Southeast and the Southwestern Yorubas, who have embraced both religions.

The Middle Belt was largely pagan until the penetration by British missionaries, first by Protestants and then by Catholics, in the mid-nineteenth century. Their previous experience with Islam made them ripe candidates for conversion to Christianity. In the pre-colonial days, the Middle Belt provided a vast reservoir of slaves for the Islamic Caliphate based around the city of Sokoto. Following the *jihad* of Usman dan Fodio, the Emirs made annual pilgrimages to the Sultan with hundreds, sometimes thousands of slaves in tow. The result was a massive, though largely undocumented internal migration and mixing of ethnic groups. After the arrival of the British the Middle Belt peoples embraced Christianity and its offer of education as a way to raise themselves from their second class status and to declare their independence from the Islamic Emirates. For the same reason, many from the region enlisted in the Nigerian Armed Forces as a means of rapid social advancement.

Since independence, the Middle Belt has been the scene of frequent flare-ups. Often clashes break out which the Nigerian and international media describe as religious riots but in fact stem from minority ethnic groups seeking to wrench themselves free from what they see as domination by the Hausa-Fulani establishment. Other eruptions involve disputes between two neighbouring ethnic groups over land and access to political office. The people of a given area claim they are the “indigenes” and that their enemies are the “strangers” or “settlers” seeking to upset the mythical natural order of things. These controversies have crackled across the Middle Belt for as long as Nigeria has existed and have claimed large numbers of lives. But they intensified in the 1990s as economic, political and educational opportunities waned with the collapse of the national economy.

The worst conflict over land and recognition of traditional leadership to date took place between the Tivs, Nigeria’s fifth biggest ethnic group, and the Jukuns. It raged around the town of Wukari in the early 1990s and claimed according to some estimates 5,000 lives.⁵⁶ It has since gradually calmed down. But by 1997, another Jukun community known as the Chambas was involved in an equally bloody affair around the town of Takum with their smaller farming neighbours called the Kutebs.

⁵⁵ Reuters [Lagos], “Angry Nigerian Youths Attack Texaco Office”, 19 August 1999

⁵⁶ See Karl Maier, *Nigeria: The Permanent Transition*, Section 6.2: “The Tiv-Jukun Case”

Like the Tiv-Jukun case, the main issue appeared to be control over farming land. The Kutebs have it and the Chambas want it. The immediate cause, however, as in Warri, was the demarcation of the local government boundaries. The Chambas have a major backer in the form of Defence Minister Danjuma, a Chamba himself. One opponent of Danjuma's nomination as a cabinet minister, identified as Reverend Andefiki from the Taraba State capital of Jalingo, filed a petition to the Senate accusing Danjuma of supporting the Chambas financially and militarily in their fight against the Kutebs.⁵⁷

One of the first major eyewitness reports of the conflict was published in Nigeria's *The Guardian* newspaper in August 1998. Its correspondent said that Chamba youths armed with rifles and machetes and working in co-operation with local police officers had ransacked Kuteb farming communities.

Most government buildings were destroyed. Health facilities and services are almost non-existent following havoc wreaked on its activities. People who escaped from the crisis take refuge in neighboring villages and towns at the mercy of friends and total strangers, while those who could not go to any town or village are taking refuge under trees and mountain tops in the bushes without enough food or access to medical facilities.

The report, entitled "Ethnic Cleansing in Takum, Taraba", said that it was common to see Jukun youths "displaying human heads and other human parts openly as they chant victory songs round the town".⁵⁸

The new Taraba State governor, Rev. Jolly Nyame, established a peace committee to reconcile the two communities shortly after taking office in May. But so far there is little sign of it making any headway. In early August reports emerged from the remote region of a major battle between army troops and Kuteb youths around the villages of Kpunbo and Lebambo. One report said that up to 200 people had been killed in pitched battles and that another 100, mainly women and children, were seriously injured.⁵⁹

3.8 Kafanchan

Another major centre of trouble has been the sleepy railway town of Kafanchan in the southern part of Kaduna State. There dozens of small ethnic groups have been struggling for years to obtain recognition of their chiefs as independent of the Hausa Emir who rules in the Jema'a part of Kafanchan town. In 1992, the nearby village of Zango-Kataf exploded into several days of violence over the decision of the local Kataf authorities to move their central market from the Hausa section of the community where it had traditionally been located.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Tempo* [Lagos], Henry Ugbole, "TY's Second Coming", 18 August 1999

⁵⁸ *The Guardian on Sunday* [Lagos], Abdulsalam Isa, "Ethnic Cleansing in Takum, Taraba", 30 August 1998

⁵⁹ *P.M. News* [Lagos], Ben Adaji, "Soldiers Kill 200", 11 August 1999

⁶⁰ See Karl Maier, *Nigeria: The Permanent Transition*, Section 6.3: "The Religious Mix and the Case of the City of Kano"

In the wake of the blow up the Kaduna State government decided to confer official recognition on the king of the Katafs, the *Agwatyap* I, and three other independent chieftaincies.⁶¹ That seemed to calm the tensions in the area until November 1998 when the 90-year-old Emir of Jema'a, Alhaji Isa Muhammadu Mohammed, died. His death set off an immediate controversy, with local ethnic groups demanding that they have their own chief. On 26 November 1998, the indigenous ethnic groups of the area wrote to the state governor, Colonel Farouk Ahmed, warning that there would be trouble if the Government attempted to install the new Emir, who is the son of the late Emir, without addressing their concerns. The letter reportedly said that "we cannot be held responsible for any breakdown in law and order in the area".⁶²

The controversy appeared to be smoothed over after the Hausa community agreed that the indigenous groups could have their own chief while the assorted ethnic groups acceded in allowing the new Emir to be installed.

Representatives of the two sides met on 7 May 1999 to confirm the agreement.⁶³ Two weeks later, against the expectations of both the Hausa community and the local non-Muslim groups, preparations were begun for the ceremony to install the new Emir. By the time the governor, Colonel Ahmed, arrived on the outskirts of town from the state capital, Kaduna, Kafanchan was engulfed in a riot. The governor was forced by the scale of the violence to turn back to Kaduna. Dozens of people were injured, several reportedly killed, and hundreds of shops and homes, including the Emir's palace, were damaged by a series of raging fires. In recent weeks, a fragile peace has returned to Kafanchan although the issue of installation of the new Emir and naming a chief for the local communities remains unresolved. The new civilian governor of Kaduna State, Alhaji Ahmed Mohammed Makarfi, has promised that new chiefs for the indigenous communities will be established soon.⁶⁴

4. REGIONAL PEACE ROLE RE-EVALUATED

4.1 Pull-out from Sierra Leone

The 7 July 1999 peace deal that has brought a cease-fire to Sierra Leone's civil war fitted perfectly into President Obasanjo's long-held belief that a democratic Nigeria cannot afford to maintain a major expeditionary force abroad. Nigeria has supplied the bulk of the 15,000 West African ECOMOG troops in Sierra Leone in support of President Tejan Kabbah's beleaguered government in Freetown against the Revolutionary United Front/Armed Forces rebels, as it did when ECOMOG was involved in neighbouring Liberia.

Nigeria began withdrawing troops from Sierra Leone in late August but decided to suspend the operation at the request of President Kabbah who feared a quick Nigerian pullout might threaten the process of disarmament and demobilization.⁶⁵ President Obasanjo, speaking on national television, appeared to suggest that the delay would only last through September when the disarmament process is scheduled to be

⁶¹ Bala Ade Dauke Gora, the *Agwatyap* I, Kafanchan. Personal Interview, 22 November 1998

⁶² *Weekly Trust* [Kaduna], "Kafanchan Crisis: Victims Blame Government", 16 July 1999

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *P.M. News* [Lagos], Bashir Kalejaiye, "Ex-MILAD Indicted", 31 August 1999

⁶⁵ *Reuters* [Abuja], "Nigeria Says to Resume Leone Pullout Next Month", 5 September 1999

completed, a prospect few observers believe likely. Under Nigeria's original withdrawal timetable, 2,000 troops would return home each month from August, with just 2,000 soldiers remaining by the end of December.⁶⁶ The current delay, however, means that Nigeria will maintain a significant force in Sierra Leone until at least early next year.

President Obasanjo confirmed that Nigeria had turned down a United Nations request to keep Nigerian troops in Sierra Leone to operate alongside a UN peacekeeping force. The reason, he suggested, was that the United Nations would not provide Nigeria with sufficient financial support to maintain its dominant position in the ECOMOG force.⁶⁷

4.2 Heavy Costs of Peacekeeping

It is impossible to estimate the total financial cost to Nigeria of its peacekeeping operations since former president General Ibrahim Babangida sent troops into Liberia in 1990 to fight the forces of the current president, Charles Taylor. But even at a daily cost of some US\$500,000, which some believe is a conservative estimate, the total would approach US\$1.5 billion. Defence Minister Danjuma has estimated that the intervention in Sierra Leone cost Nigeria US\$1 million a day.⁶⁸

The Nigerian army is poorly funded and morale is low, and the new government's priority will be on reorganization and retraining of the armed forces as well as dealing with the unrest in the Niger Delta. Danjuma said regional peacekeeping was "not in our long-term interest because of its enormous cost to our national economy, more so as there are other competing needs for those resources at home".⁶⁹

Danjuma was also quoted as saying:

Right now, we are becoming the United States of ECOWAS at very great costs to us. We think this is unaffordable to us now. Even some powers like the metropolitan powers of the continent feel we are throwing our weight around. So it is expensive, not popular and moreover, we have great needs at home. We want to play a role as equals. Maybe not numbers. This unilateral posture has exposed us to too much.⁷⁰

While Nigeria's peacekeeping role has been applauded by Western countries and the United Nations, at home it has grown increasingly unpopular over the years amid reports of mounting casualties and murky contracts involving senior military officers. The Nigerian death toll in Sierra Leone has never been officially disclosed, but estimates run into the hundreds.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *The Vanguard* [Lagos], Kingsley Omonobi, "30,000 Soldiers to Go", 18 August 1999

⁶⁹ Reuters [Lagos, 19 August 1999

⁷⁰ *The Vanguard* [Lagos], 18 August 1999

⁷¹ Reuters [Lagos], 9 July 1999

4.3 New Emphasis on Diplomacy and Regional Co-operation

Under military rule, regional military intervention allowed the dictators, General Babangida and General Abacha, to deflect international criticism of their repression at home by seemingly supporting democracy abroad. While the United States and Britain criticized General Abacha's clampdown against pro-democracy activists, they applauded Nigeria for its role in Liberia and support for the fledgling democratic government in Sierra Leone. Added benefits of intervention included diverting the attention of ambitious military officers from causing political trouble at home and promoting substantial business opportunities in supporting such a large military force abroad.

The Obasanjo administration should prove to be far more inward looking, with its primary emphasis on reducing corruption and improving living standards. Without substantial financial support from the United Nations and the Western powers, there is little chance that President Obasanjo will pursue the same regional interventionist policies as his military predecessors.

President Obasanjo's personal pedigree in peacekeeping matters is impeccable, having served as an officer with the United Nations intervention force in the Congo in the 1960s. During South African President Thabo Mbeki's inauguration, Obasanjo expressed renewed interest in contributing troops to a peacekeeping force in the Congo.⁷² Diplomatic initiatives and regional co-operation both in West Africa and further afield are likely to characterize the new government's approach to solving armed conflict in Africa.

5. CONCLUSION

A year before taking office as Nigeria's first elected president in 15 years, Olusegun Obasanjo was languishing in prison with only a Bible and a Koran to read in the far north eastern city of Yola accused of trying to plot a *coup d'état*. He was, as he said in his inaugural speech, "a man who had walked through the shadow of death". His erstwhile jailer was preparing to transform himself from military dictator into anointed civilian president. Hundreds of people had been locked up; Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, Obasanjo's deputy during the 1976-1979 government, had died while in prison, the victim of an apparent lethal injection by an Abacha hit squad. Suddenly, Abacha died of an apparent heart attack and was followed a month later by Moshood Abiola, the man who was widely believed to have won the 12 June 1993 presidential elections. In the space of one year, Obasanjo has sought to prove the truth of one of his favourite sayings: "God is a Nigerian."

It is common in the current atmosphere for Nigerian politicians and commentators to say that the military could never come back to power, that it is too discredited and too demoralized to make another attempt to occupy the Aso Rock presidential palace in Abuja. Given Nigeria's history of military rule, some 30 of 39 years of independence, such confidence would appear to be premature. But the gravest threat to the new civilian order in the near future is not a return of the soldiers. The new government appears to be well guarded from any attempts at another *coup d'état*. An impressive

⁷² United Nations, Integrated Regional Information Network, "[Obasanjo Agrees Nigeria Peacekeepers for DRC](#)", Johannesburg, 16 June 1999

array of retired military officers were instrumental in bringing Obasanjo to office. They linked up with the most powerful political machine in Nigeria in the past two decades which was built by the late Yar'Adua. The men behind Obasanjo include Danjuma, Obasanjo's former army chief of staff during the 1970s, and the wily spy-master, Aliyu Mohammed, who is credited with modernizing Nigeria's secret services and who served under General Babangida. While the Nigerian media has been full of reports that Danjuma, who is reportedly suffering from depression, has attempted at least once to resign, official sources deny it.⁷³

Obasanjo was considered an ideal candidate for the presidency because as a Yoruba he was believed to be able to assuage the feelings of his ethnic kinsmen over the demise of Abiola and because almost unique among political leaders today he rejects playing tribal politics. Obasanjo has proved himself to be an ardent Nigerian nationalist. As a colonel commanding the Third Marine Division, Obasanjo effectively ended the civil war by capturing Biafran Radio and broadcasting a message for the Biafrans to lay down their arms. In 1979, he handed over power to an elected president, Shehu Shagari, a Hausa, despite insistent calls from his Yoruba homeland to void the vote.

Initially, when Obasanjo contested the presidency, the vast majority of Yoruba voters opposed him because of his military past and his apparent lack of warm support for Moshood Abiola. Obasanjo was routinely criticized as a pawn of the "Northern oligarchy", a reference to the politically powerful leadership of the Hausa-Fulanis of the North. In the election itself, the southwestern region voted heavily for Obasanjo's opponent, Olu Falae, with Obasanjo losing Lagos State by an 88 to 12 margin. Since the election, however, Yoruba opposition to Obasanjo has mellowed, with one of the key Yoruba leaders, Bola Ige, now serving as his Minister of Power and Steel. Lagos was beset by riots in May when rumours spread that the then president-elect Obasanjo had died.

The biggest dangers to the new government are the abysmal state of the economy and the continued outbreaks of ethnic and religious violence that could spiral out of control. Already the violence in the Niger Delta is costing, besides the mounting human toll, millions of dollars a day in funds that Nigeria needs desperately to rebuild the country.

Unless the Government can free up the dynamism of the populace and spur the economy forward with haste, demands for "restructuring" Nigeria along ethnic and regional lines will grow. In the meantime, President Obasanjo will have to handle the sporadic violence with as much tact as possible. The Government's agenda is necessarily trying to tackle many issues at once: the legacy of military corruption and human rights abuses, economic growth, ethnic conflict and reform of the armed forces, all the while trying to maintain good relations with international creditors and attract badly needed foreign investment.

However daunting the challenge may appear, today Nigeria has the best chance at any time in nearly 20 years to begin to realize its vast potential and bring a very dark period in its short history to a close.

⁷³ *Tempo* [Lagos], 18 August 1999 and Reuters [Lagos], 19 August 1999

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