

# Political and social crisis grows as Clinton condemns Nigeria

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Hundreds of people have been killed as communal violence broke out in the Nigerian city of Jos and surrounding areas last month. The official death toll stands at 326, but is thought to be higher. Thousands of people have been displaced from their homes and are living in makeshift camps.

Even as bodies were still being recovered, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemned Nigerian leaders for the increased radicalisation of the country's youth.

"Nigeria faces a threat from increasing radicalisation," Clinton said. The failure of its government to meet the needs of its population, she said, was providing "an opening for extremism that offers an alternative world view."

She was referring to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who is accused of trying to blow up a plane as it landed in Detroit on December 25 of last year. The banker's son, Clinton maintained, was "disturbed by his father's wealth."

What the implications of such a connection between extreme parental wealth and mass poverty would be for the elite circles of American society Clinton did not say. But neither did she address the role of the US in creating the political and economic conditions in Nigeria that she now condemns. The domination of this oil-rich country by a wealthy oligarchy is thanks in large part to the influence of the US, which has relied on the privileged group in the mainly Muslim north that Britain cultivated during the colonial period.

Reports suggest that last month's violence was orchestrated. Text messages were circulating urging attacks on rival communities. One such message read, "War, war, war. Stand up...and defend yourselves. Kill before they kill you. Slaughter before they slaughter

you. Dump them in a pit before they dump you."

Awalu Mohamed of Jamatu Nasril Islam told reporters that he had recovered some of the bodies in the village of Kuru Karama. "We went to one family and found the entire family there, 20-something of them, including the small, small kids," he said. "All of them burned to ashes."

Meanwhile in the Niger Delta, the ceasefire agreed in October of last year has come to an end. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) announced that it was ending the ceasefire last month. Shortly afterwards, Shell-BP's Trans Ramos pipeline was cut in what the company described as "sabotage."

MEND denied direct responsibility but said, "It was certainly a response to our order to resume hostilities by one of the various freelance groups we endorse."

They warned the oil companies of an "all-out onslaught" on their facilities and personnel.

Growing dissatisfaction with the ceasefire had been expressed in the form of protests. Youths complaining that they had not received the payments promised when they handed in their arms protested in Bayelsa state last year.

"There are still thousands of people willing to continue fighting in the creeks and only the actions of the government can win over our brothers still bent on fighting," Farah Dagogo of MEND said in a press statement.

The violence in Jos and the breakdown of the ceasefire follow what the *Economist* has described as the "increasingly jittery" state of Nigeria due to the prolonged absence of President Umaru Yar'Adua. He went to Saudi Arabia for treatment of a heart condition in November.

According to the *Economist*, "rival factions in the

ruling People's Democratic Party [PDP]" were "already busy plotting" their next moves just before the violence broke out in Jos.

Yar'Adua came to power in 2007 as the first civilian Nigerian president to take power from another civilian president. At the time, the US put its weight behind his government and dismissed opposition complaints about corruption.

Clinton now points to a decade in which "a lot of the indicators about quality of life in Nigeria have gone in the wrong direction" and describes the level of corruption as "unbelievable." But only last summer, on a visit to Nigeria, she dismissed criticisms of Yar'Adua's election, pointing out that the US had electoral problems too.

Her husband, former President Bill Clinton, has close financial connections with Nigerian businessman Gilbert Chagoury. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Chagoury is one of the biggest donors to the Clinton Foundation. He was a close associate of the Nigerian military dictator Sani Abacha. Members of the family donated thousands of dollars to Hillary Clinton's campaign for the Democratic nomination for the 2008 presidential election.

Any transfer of power in Nigeria is always a delicate balancing act involving the mediation of the conflicting interests of the various elite factions. Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan has taken on presidential powers in Yar'Adua's absence, but he is from the south and not trusted by the northern elite. Whoever controls the presidency has enormous powers of patronage over oil revenues.

Little of that oil wealth ever filters down to the majority of the population. While the Nigerian government considers launching a sovereign wealth fund to invest its oil wealth in international markets, about 92 percent of the population live on less than \$2 a day. An estimated 71 percent live on less than \$1 a day, according to the latest UNESCO figures. UNESCO's 2010 Global Monitoring Report, *Reaching the Marginalised*, puts Nigeria among the 20 poorest countries in the world on the basis of per capita income. While poverty is most extreme in the rural areas, even salary earners in the urban areas cannot support their families adequately.

The Washington-based Fund for Peace ranked Nigeria among the 20 worst failed states last year. An

article in *Foreign Policy* launching the Failed State report in June 2009 commented, "In the cool air-conditioning of the Silverbird Galleria mall in Lagos, Nigeria, it is hard to remember that you are in the 15th-most failed state in the world. The chic coffee shops and designer clothes oddly befit Africa's newest financial hub, where business suits and talk of the latest market returns are ubiquitous. This elegant enclave on Lagos's Victoria Island—less than an hour's plane ride from the rebel-infested creeks of the oil-producing region—is no anomaly, either for Nigeria or for many failed states. Many such countries have shining capital cities or thriving commercial centers, while festering pockets of instability lurk elsewhere. Ethnic separatists might set rural areas ablaze while coastal elites build office parks. Even the worst failed states have enclaves that thrive."

The stark contrast the authors of the report describe speaks of massive and growing levels of social inequality. That is what underlies what they call a "failed state." It is the result of the looting of a country by the banks, the major corporations and their local representatives over centuries. The response of the US, Britain and other major powers to the social and political crisis that is engulfing Nigeria will be to step up repression, not to reduce the levels of inequality.



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