

NIGERIA'S INVESTMENT-FRIENDLY ECONOMY

*To The Belgian Parliament
The Kingdom of Belgium, 12 July, 2001*

It is indeed a matter of satisfaction and great honour for me to address this august assembly of Parliamentarians on the occasion of my first official visit to the kingdom of Belgium. On behalf of myself, the delegation, and all the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, I wish to express appreciation to the King and Government of the people of Belgium, for the invitation and the opportunity to address the Parliament located in Brussels, which indeed is the heart of Europe and the European Union.

The time and space of this occasion has a number of factors which I wish to focus on. As my host, it is important that I should make adequate references to Belgium-Nigerian relations. But as you are all aware, I have just literally come away from the annual Summit of the Organisation of African Unity, and I must say that the continent of Africa is at the top of my mind. I do not think that this will be misplaced, as Belgium has had its fair share of involvement in the recent history of Africa.

Honorable Parliamentarians, the record of human interaction between Africa and Europe goes as far back as the 10th century, but the history of that interaction in the last two centuries has had consequences that have influenced - and continue to influence - the lives of generations of Africans. In fact, several aspects of the conditions of life on our continent today have their root causes in our colonial experience. This point is not an apology or even to blame, but merely to state the reality of the **African condition**. And it is a reality that has to be acknowledged if Africa and Europe are ever to agree on building mutually beneficial relations that will transform our continent from poverty and degradation, to wealth and prosperity.

Honorable Parliamentarians, the African condition today is not a cheerful one:

- ▶ less than 35 per cent of our population are literate,
- ▶ healthcare delivery system is far from adequate, so life expectancy in most of our countries is not much higher than 50 years
- ▶ internal and cross-border transportation and communication systems are far from developed,
- ▶ all African societies contend with large scale unemployment,
- ▶ population on the continent continues to grow more rapidly than in most continents,
- ▶ while at the same time the revenue available to most governments continue to shrink in proportion to the increasingly large sums that the African continent have to put aside to service large foreign

debts.

The grim African condition is compounded by pervasive conflicts which constitute some of the greatest challenges Africa has to face today. The resolution of these conflicts is absolutely essential for creating an environment of security and stability which are mandatory for development.

Furthermore the continent is in the grip of terror from the nexus of malaria and HIV/AIDS, which by most accounts threatens the very existence of life on our continent.

We, in Africa have risen to the challenges posed by these threats to development and progress on our continent.

African leaders declared last year as a **Year of Peace, Security and Stability** on our continent. And we are pleased to report that progress in conflict resolution and containment has been steady. Only last year, African leaders met for a Summit on Malaria, and came up with a comprehensive plan on how to contain and eventually eradicate this killer disease from our continent with a Roll-back Malaria Programme. Also, a couple of months ago the Organisation of African Unity held a Summit on HIV/AIDS and other related infectious diseases in a bid to halt the devastation by this pandemic that has a peculiar African bias.

Africa must of course bear the bulk of the responsibility for curtailing and resolving conflicts on the continent. But that is not to deny the role which Europe and the international community have to play:

- ▶ they can assist African countries in their efforts towards developing their capacity and human resource potential;
- ▶ they can encourage, assist, and defend democracy on the continent;
- ▶ they can cooperate with Africa in repudiating the vices of bigotry, intolerance, and xenophobia;
- ▶ they can offer greater financial assistance towards catering for refugees and internally displaced persons.

In the instance of killer diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS and other related infectious diseases, African leaders at the recent OAU Summit, further confirmed their commitment to fight this scourge by establishing **Africa Leadership AIDS Watch**. This is in addition to material commitment at various other levels. We are pleased to note that the plight of Africa has been suitably registered by the establishment of a Global Trust Fund for HIV/AIDS, and we are eagerly waiting for effective response to this desperate need to give succor to all affected and afflicted people all over the world but particularly Africa.

Honourable Parliamentarians, there is a serious sense in which Europe has a residual responsibility for assisting the rehabilitation of Africa. If nothing else, there is the sense in which it can be demonstrated that the burden which Africa has to bear today, is directly traceable to the lopsided encounter of Europe and Africa. But apart from this, there are considerations of mutuality of interests between developed and developing countries. I wish to refer specifically to the concept of globalisation that now dominates the thinking on international relations and world order. Globalisation would for us mean marginalisation - *if not total de-linkage*, if the African condition, which is encumbered with numerous disadvantages, is not fully considered and brought into the equation.

We have noticed with discomfort the unbalanced nature in which Western Europe has responded to the crisis situation of Eastern Europe, as compared with similar circumstances in Africa. Intervention on the part of industrialised countries of Western Europe, especially after the happy and very encouraging end of the Cold War, is no longer an ideological issue. Nor does it have much to do with charity or discharge of sentimental responsibility. Positive responsibility is today an indispensable obligation of all members of the international community.

In the case of Nigeria, we are faced with the need to pursue rapid industrialisation so as to be able to provide our citizens with the basic requirements of decent life that are taken for granted in the industrialised world. We must find the resources for improving healthcare delivery, education, and general social welfare. It is our responsibility to ensure that every citizen is at all times protected in his enjoyment of the ordinary rights of all citizens. At the same time, we are aware of our international obligations, particularly the maintenance of peace, security and stability in our region.

Honourable Parliamentarians, when we in Africa demand debt remission, we do so because such relief would leave us with greater resources to cater for our domestic needs, as well as our international obligations. In the same vein, when we press European governments to help us recover the vast sums of money, illegally taken from us by our own people, but stashed away with the connivance of Europeans, we do so because such recovered funds can greatly alleviate the difficult circumstances of looking after our developmental priorities.

Honourable Parliamentarians, we seek understanding. We seek genuine partnership. We seek mutually beneficial investment. We seek fairer terms of international trade. Europe is rich, strong, developed, and democratic. The European Union is one of the strongest defences the world has against social and political upheavals in any part of the world. We, in Africa have the ambition to be rich, strong, industrialised, and democratic. But Africa does not possess the means to achieve this all on its own.

We believe we can - *and should* - be partners for progress, partners for enhanced development and security, and, indeed, partners for a better world. We have little choice but to hold together in the global village for the benefit of humankind!

I thank you for your attention.

May God bless you all.