

A Country and a Continent, Hanging in the Balance

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Letter From Nigeria

By LYDIA POLGREEN

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Jan. 21 - The past week was a busy one for [Olusegun Obasanjo](#), the Nigerian president. There he was Monday morning, beaming as Liberia's new president took the oath of office, cementing a peace Mr. Obasanjo had worked to build. And here he was Wednesday, perched on a settee and clasping the hand of the president of Ivory Coast, [Laurent Gbagbo](#), trying to put out the flames engulfing that country as militant youths rampaged against the United Nations and France.

By week's end he was preparing to head to Khartoum for a meeting of the African Union, of which he is the departing chairman, to weigh in on the long list of crises besetting the continent at the moment: brutal warring in the Darfur region of Sudan, political violence in Ethiopia and bellicose posturing between Chad and Sudan, to name a few.

But two crises unlikely to make the agenda in Khartoum are the ones Mr. Obasanjo faces at home: one in the Niger Delta and the other on the country's contentious political scene. Those fraught situations are tearing at the delicate threads that hold together the ethnic and religious crazy quilt of vast, populous [Nigeria](#) - about twice the size of California, with a population nearing half that of the United States.

In the always volatile delta, fresh violence from militants seeking more local control over oil wealth has slashed oil production and helped send prices to a four-month high. The militants, from the delta's dominant Ijaw tribe, have attacked pipelines and captured four oil workers, demanding that the government release two of their jailed leaders and \$1.5 billion from Shell, Nigeria's biggest oil producer. [On Sunday, a militant group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, promised more attacks if their leaders were not freed, and threatened in an e-mail message that it could hold the hostages for years, Reuters reported.]

The political crisis has emerged from widespread speculation that Mr. Obasanjo will seek to alter the Constitution in order to run for a third term in 2007, a possibility that Mr. Obasanjo has not ruled out. The crisis has already upset the delicate ethnic and religious balance in national politics, with each group staking a what it believes is an ironclad right to claim the presidency. Nigeria, despite its history of dictatorial military rule within its borders, has long been an enforcer and guarantor of democracy in Africa, a role that Mr. Obasanjo has expanded.

Its troubles come at a time when the stakes for Africa could not be higher. With crucial elections scheduled in many countries this year and next, including Congo, Uganda, Ivory Coast and Nigeria, the fulcrum between democracy and good governance and autocracy and tyranny could shift significantly.

And so the prospect of new ferment in Nigeria could reverberate with deep and lasting impact.

Nigeria's Nobel laureate and longtime pro-democracy agitator, Wole Soyinka, recently declared that he and his fellow activists must prepare to head "back to the trenches" of the struggle, so grave is the current threat.

"Even the incurable optimists, as some of us are, are deeply worried," said Kayode Fayemi, director of the Center for Democracy and Development in Nigeria, a political scientist and longtime pro-democracy activist. "Six years down the line in the attempt to build democracy this is what we get: violence in the land, and a government in breach. The only thing happening is politics. It is motion without movement."

Political violence of the type that preceded the country's elections in 1999 and 2003 appears to be on the rise as well. The wife of a prominent northern politician was found stabbed to death in her home. Nothing was taken from the house, according to Nigerian newspaper reports, leading many to conclude that her killing was a warning to her husband, Abubakar Rimi, a crucial member of a coalition of powerful northerners opposed to any extension of Mr. Obasanjo's rule.

Nigeria's vice president, Atiku Abubakar, a former general and northerner, would like to succeed Mr. Obasanjo, but the president has made it clear that he opposes that, and a deepening political row in the governing party has broken out over the succession question.

In the complex ethnic politics of Nigeria, factions have emerged in the People's Democratic Party urging that the presidency shift to a different ethnic group. Ruled for most of its history by Muslim generals from the north, Nigerians in the South-South, as the Niger Delta is known, say it is their turn, while northerners say that after two terms of Mr. Obasanjo, a Yoruba Christian from the southwest, they should get the presidency again.

The two crises are not entirely separate. The political confusion has created the space for delta militants seeking more local control over oil wealth to seize the national stage. Attacks on oil facilities and kidnappings have long been used to extort jobs, development projects and cash from oil companies, but the latest violence appears to be political in nature and pure sabotage, a worrying development, according to Sebastian Spio-Garbrah, an analyst at the Eurasia Group, a private research firm.

Taken together, these situations pose a huge challenge for Nigeria as it enters a period of great uncertainty. Indeed, nearly 46 years after its independence, a period in which the

country seesawed between civilian and military rule, the unity of Nigeria is still by no means assured. Though it is undoubtedly among the most powerful, wealthy and influential African nations - South Africa is its only serious rival in this regard - it has always struggled to make sense of its volatile mix of cultures, languages, religions and even landscapes. In its awesome diversity, it is the whole of Africa in microcosm.

"Nigerian unity is only a British invention," said the northern politician Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, in 1948, 12 years before independence made him Nigeria's first federal prime minister.

Of course a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. The searing experience of the Biafran War, a brutal conflict in which Mr. Obasanjo played a crucial role in ending as a junior army officer, has long given Nigerians contemplating secession pause. And the discovery of oil in the 1950's in the delta has given Nigeria an economic logic for unity for decades.

Still, a report on the future of sub-Saharan Africa published by the National Intelligence Council, a government think tank for the United States intelligence services, after a conference on the topic last March, identified the collapse of Nigeria as the most important risk facing Africa today.

"While currently Nigeria's leaders are locked in a bad marriage that all dislike but dare not leave, there are possibilities that could disrupt the precarious equilibrium in Abuja," the report said. "If Nigeria were to become a failed state, it could drag down a large part of the West African region."

"Further," it continued, "a failed Nigeria probably could not be reconstituted for many years - if ever - and not without massive international assistance."

Nevertheless, Nigeria has along history of ferment, but also a long history of pragmatism that has kept it together despite its troubles.

"This is a very critical moment for Nigeria," Mr. Fayemi said. "But we have a history of going to the edge, then pulling back from the brink."