

Testimony of Mary Beth Leonard
Ambassadorial Nominee to the Federal Republic of Nigeria
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
July 17, 2019

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee,

I am so deeply honored to appear before you today as the nominee to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I would like to thank my family, of both the actual and Foreign Service trees, who are with me in spirit and virtually through the magic of live streaming.

Indeed, the list of prior U.S. ambassadors to Nigeria includes many of my most valued mentors and professional idols in the Foreign Service, and I am grateful to President Trump and Secretary Pompeo for the trust and confidence they have shown in nominating me for this position. Having completed seven tours in Africa and two domestic Africa-related assignments in the course of my 31-year Foreign Service career, if confirmed I will strive to marshal these experiences to follow successfully in their storied footsteps. As U.S. Ambassador in Mali, I addressed converging issues of governance and security; in my current assignment as Ambassador to the African Union, I have regularly witnessed Nigeria's diplomatic heft and agility, as well as regional coordination to address its security challenges. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with members of the Committee and your staffs to promote and protect U.S. interests with Nigeria.

With the continent's largest population, democracy, and economy, Nigeria fully merits the sobriquet of "Africa's giant," and our relationship with Nigeria is arguably the most important one in sub-Saharan Africa. It is no understatement to say that overarching U.S. policy

priorities for Africa in trade, counter-terrorism, good governance, human rights, and responsible use of U.S. government resources can only be met if we meet them in Nigeria.

As I began my preparations for the confirmation process, I was struck by the depth of passion evinced by those who follow Nigeria's many paradoxes. Its vast oil revenues help fuel a huge economy, yet corruption and failures of governance have blocked meaningful health services, educational opportunities, prosperity, and access to justice for too many of its citizens. Security challenges including communal violence and terrorism stand in counterpoint to wellsprings of vibrant entrepreneurs and cultural achievements in film, literature, and academia more broadly. The challenge for this strategically important partner – and the U.S. relationship with it – is how Nigeria can successfully validate its inestimable promise for peace and prosperity for its own citizens and the broader region. President Buhari, recently elected to a second term, shares our priorities of expanding economic growth, increasing security, and countering corruption. If confirmed, I will be committed to harnessing U.S. diplomacy, foreign assistance, and the ingenuity and appeal of the U.S. private sector to partner with Nigeria toward these goals.

Nigeria is our second-largest trading partner in Africa with over \$8 billion in total trade in goods in 2018; hundreds of U.S. companies do business in Nigeria. President Trump in his meeting with President Buhari at the White House in April 2018 – the first African head of state he welcomed there – emphasized the potential for expanded U.S.-Nigerian trade. By adopting more market-oriented economic policies, improving infrastructure and the investment climate, and tackling corruption, the Government of Nigeria can present great opportunities for both of our countries. That is why the U.S. government welcomes Nigeria's recent decision to sign on to the African Continental Free Trade Area. As I've stated often in my role as Ambassador to the

African Union, by opening African markets and lowering barriers to trade and investment, this agreement can pave the way for increased U.S.-Africa trade. If confirmed, I would look to harness U.S. tools – from existing ones like the African Growth and Opportunity Act and our hard-working Foreign Commercial and Agriculture Service Officers – to newer ones like Prosper Africa and the Development Finance Cooperation’s increased budget for insurance, loans and loan guarantees, and equity investments to promote our mutual prosperity.

Nigerians in nearly all of the country’s 36 states are plagued by insecurity: terrorism in the Northeast, banditry and inter-communal conflict in the Northwest and Middle Belt, militant attacks in the Niger Delta, maritime crime and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and kidnapping and criminal gangs throughout the country. Vice President Pence and Nigerian Vice President Osinbajo discussed these security challenges as well as ways to better protect civilians during their June 26 White House meeting. Nigeria is working with its neighbors to improve the stability of the Lake Chad Basin, counter Boko Haram, and put down the attempted rise of ISIS-West Africa. If confirmed, I will keep firmly in mind our long-term goal of a more operationally capable and professional Nigerian military and police services that respect human rights, protect civilians, and hold those responsible for abuses and violations to account, as only these kinds of security forces can truly deliver security to the people of Nigeria. The Nigerian government must continue to work to ensure that the almost eight million people still reliant on humanitarian assistance can safely return to their communities and restart their livelihoods. Separately, I have also been alarmed by reports of escalating farmer-herder and inter-communal conflict frequently based in resource competition, but enflamed by conflation of ethnic and religious overlays. If confirmed, I will work to ensure the U.S. government is using its full range of tools to help

Nigerians address these conflicts' root causes, enhance security and justice sector response, and support Nigerian inter-faith and inter-communal efforts.

Nigeria's ability to succeed in fulfilling its inestimable promise depends heavily on building trust between the government and its people, as well as strengthening its democracy and respect for human rights. A large share of our almost \$520 million FY 2018 bilateral assistance portfolio helps Nigeria build human capital, fight poverty and promote health, and it creates a more productive and stable African partner. Youth employment and education for women and girls are also key elements of these efforts. Nigeria's 2015 elections contributed to a positive West African trend toward increasingly democratic elections and peaceful transfers of power. Despite some flaws, the 2019 elections demonstrated Nigeria's commitment to improving its democracy. As it passes the 20-year mark of a return to democratic rule, I, if confirmed, will ensure the United States continues to be a stalwart partner of the Nigerian people as they work to solidify their country's place as a democratic leader in Africa.

Nigeria's regional and global impact is enormous, and its dynamic people are the greatest asset of a nation whose resources are equal in scale to its considerable challenges. Like Americans, Nigerians are hard-working, inventive, and entrepreneurial. Nigeria's youth are fueling exceptional endeavors in areas from Information Technology to agriculture, offering the promise of the opportunities the country will need to meet the challenge of its youthful demographics. If confirmed to the privilege of directing the U.S. relationship with Africa's giant, I look forward to channeling our own nation's dynamism with the full range of our diplomatic, assistance, and commercial tools to support Nigeria toward the prosperity and security on which our and the continent's shared futures depend.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the Committee, I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you, and I look forward to your questions.