

TRANSCRIPT: Joint Press Availability

Assistant Secretary Tibor P. Nagy with INEC Chairman, Mahmood Yakubu.

Abuja - November 8, 2018

*****Start Transcript*****

Ambassador Symington:

Good afternoon everybody and welcome. Today's is an extraordinarily important day for at least two reasons; the first is that we are joined here for his first time as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs of the United States of America, by Tibor Nagy who is no stranger to Nigeria. He recently served here as the Chargé d'Affaires right before I got here. But earlier in his career he was privileged to work as Deputy Chief of Mission and often as Chargé when our embassy was located in Lagos, where he served under Ambassador Swing and Ambassador Carrington. And he's now back as the highest position of the United States focused entirely on the African Continent. We are also joined by a man that needs no introduction to Nigerians. By the chairman of your Independent National Electoral Commission and by his commissioner.

Without any further ceremony let me, if I may, turn this conversation over to our distinguished visitor.

Assistant Secretary Nagy:

Thank you very much Mr. Ambassador, Chairman, Commissioner. Thank you very much for this opportunity. I just want to say a few words about how critically important the United States of America considers this election coming up in Nigeria. And that's for a number of reasons. Primarily amongst them is that Nigeria play such a prominent role as far as the United States is concerned, in all of the African Continent. Nigeria has been an example and a model of the type of democratic processes, which would be wonderful to have throughout the African Continent. Not only as Nigeria, the largest African country, with the largest economy, but the last elections in 2015 were an absolute positive example on how an election should be conducted and so much of the credit goes to the commission for their phenomenal, positive, and very objective work in managing those elections.

So we have every confidence that the commission again would be up to the task which we all know is a very, very difficult task, given the enormity of this process. So we are very encouraged by what we heard today regarding the plans for the February elections. We will remain very interested, and we were very honored, to be able to host the Chairman in the United States recently to be able to observe the preparations for our own elections. We understand all of the complexities and we most especially urge all of the parties concerned to please urge all of their followers

to be non-violent. And also to urge all of the organs of state security, especially to remain neutral in this process because the neutrality of the state absolutely essential. So again, to both of you, you have our respect and our admiration and thanks for the very, very difficult work you're doing. Thank you so much.

INEC Chairman, Prof Yakubu:

Thank you very much, Assistant Secretary of State. Thank you very much Mr. Ambassador. I'm joined by my colleague May Agbamuche-Mbu who is a national commissioner in charge of legal services. Assistant Secretary let me say how pleased we are to have met you. The United States is the largest presidential democracy in the world. Nigeria is the second largest presidential democracy in the world, with a voter population of over 80 million.

We are determined to prove that what happened in 2015 in Nigeria wasn't just a fluke. And we want to make 2019 yet a further affirmation of the maturity of the Nigerian democracy.

We are committed to these processes. We are encouraged by the fact that the international community is interested in what is going to happen in Nigeria in the next 99 days. We only have 99 days to the 2019 general elections. And we want to assure you that we will stay the course. The Elections in 2019 will be free, fair, credible, and will focus on the processes—our own processes. And not parties or actors. So I want to assure you that we will do our best to ensure that we maintain the credibility of the process and I want to assure you that we will not let the international community down. Thank you very much.

Ambassador Symington:

Ladies and gentlemen, if you have a question right now, we will be delighted to entertain it.

Question: My name is Sunday Isuwa, I report for Leadership Newspaper. My question goes to the Assistant Secretary of State. Why is the United States so much interested about our elections—Nigeria Election? Since the beginning of this year, we've been having statements coming from the United States showing much concern about this election. Why is this so?

Assistant Secretary Nagy:

That's a great question and I'll also let the Ambassador address it. I think the main reason is because of what I mentioned before. It's the critical importance of Nigeria as an example not just for the rest of Africa but in many respects to much of the rest of world. And what happens in Nigeria is tremendously significant not just in Nigeria but to all of Africa and to the rest of the world.

It's like when I was talking to reporters about my trip to the continent. And they asked me where I was going, I named the countries and they said, why are you going to Nigeria? And I said, how can I not go to Nigeria, given its importance? And that also addresses, you know, why are we interested in the elections? How could we not be interested in the elections, being part of the democratic-process world? So, yes of course we are very interested. We are delighted to have a non-partisan organization like the Commission leading the elections because in so many places, people leading the election are very partisan. It's extremely encouraging that here it is not. Mr. Ambassador, you want to add anything?

Ambassador Symington:

The question was, why are we so interested? And the answer is, because it's so important. I was trying to arrange a meeting for my visitor with your Minister of Foreign Affairs. But he's not in Nigeria today. And the reason he's not here is that, once again Nigeria is stepping up to go another country and to work in that other country to make sure that the political process and the governance process is a little bit better because Nigeria cares. So the another reason we care so much about Nigeria, is not just about the future Mr. Chairman, of your country, Commission of your country, it's the absolute moral high ground, and integrity, and of the impact of Nigeria on Africa - and therefore on the entire world. Thank you very much.

Question: My name is Nasiru Adamu, I report for voice of America. I have one question for you, Assistant Secretary of State and the other one for the Nigerian electoral empire body's boss, Prof. Mahmood Yakubu. My question is, I have heard you saying you are satisfied with the election in Nigeria. But I want to know how do you come in this time around to help Nigeria? So that the election will be more credible than the ones in 2015. I want to hear about that particularly. What is your particular contribution? How do you coming in? We want to hear United States plans to really come and help Nigeria to ensure that election in 2019 will be better than that one in 2015.

Then if I can..., question to Prof. Mahmood Yakubu. How do you tell the world that this election will be credible? I want to know because (...inaudible...) in 2011, INEC said the election was better than that one in 2007 and the one in 2015 maybe you'll say is the best and now you are saying, the one in 2019 will be more better than that one in 2015. I you to tell the world that you Prof Mahmood Yakubu will make sure that the election is credible, is acceptable and also... (*cautioned*).

Ambassador Symington:

Okay! Thank you very much. You might go from the line of being a questionnaire to being a politician.

Assistant Secretary Nagy:

You said we want to make sure that the election is better than the one in 2015? I don't think any of us have said that we want to make sure that it's better than 2015. Each election has its own yardstick given the circumstances. So we are looking for transparency, credibility, fairness, there are a number of criteria. They have to be judged against what happens then. The reason that the Embassy has been making statements, and going and looking and analyzing for months as the previous questioner said.

We all have to remember that elections are not about Election Day. Elections are about the process leading up to the Election Day. It is like preparing for a feast. You bake everything. You shop for the things, you bake them and you put them all together. Election Day is eating the feast. Usually the Election Day goes fairly well no matter what the circumstances but the critical element is leading up to it. And the Embassy here has been so engaged in a number of programs in cooperation with the Commission to make that all the ingredients for the feast are gathered properly.

That's why, but as far as, you know, is this going to be better than the last one? That's going to be for the historians. Right now we want to make sure that this process right now is transparent, and it will end up being credible, thanks to the commission. And also I want to underline one thing because, often times, people say, well, you know, you Americans you have a candidate. Or you're always in favor of this part or that party. We have a candidate in every election in the world. And that candidate is The Process. The Process. I want to underline that. The Americans will always support the process. We don't care who wins. That's up to the people of Nigeria. It's up to the commission to make sure that the process is good but we are in favor of the process. Full stop. Thank you.

INEC Chairman, Prof Yakubu:

Well, thank you very much on the question that you directed at the Commission. Let me say that since our appointment in 2015, we have conducted several elections. Well over a hundred and ninety. When is the next election? Next weekend, in four states. And we have learned from the elections that we have conducted. And you can see the progressive improvement in the processes. We have improved on planning. We have improved on delivery of logistics. We have improved on our openness and transparency. So we have continued to improve on those processes. The outcome is in the hands of Nigerians. And our commitment is to the protection of the integrity of the processes and then to the outcome of the elections as determined by Nigerians and nobody else. Thank you.

Ambassador Symington:

I'd like to do one more quick-one. Yesterday I was in one of your states and I was talking to your resident electoral commissions. And I heard something wonderful. For the first time in the history of Nigerians, the voter registration list was posted yesterday all over the country in every polling unit. I'm not sure whether they have reached the final hardest to reach polling unit yet. But the notion is that Nigeria has put the voter registration list right there for every Nigerian to see. Secretary Nagy

often talks about the importance of youth. You know that youth cannot vote until a) they are 18 and b) they have a voter registration card. But here is something that all the young people of Nigeria can do today. You can go down to your polling unit and look at the list. And if you see that somebody's name is misspelt, or their age is wrong or their gender is wrong. Or maybe, it's a beloved family member who has died. You can then tell somebody, and like Assistant Secretary Nagy just said, you can be part of making sure that the election that will happen next February, happens on the base of a voter registration list that you've made better today. Is that true Mr. Chairman?

INEC Chairman Prof Yakubu:

Absolutely. We have pasted the registers as required by law in all the 119,973 polling units nationwide. And we will take claims and objections by citizens in the 8,809 wards nationwide. Thereafter, the cleaned up register will be given to each of the 91 political parties in Nigeria as at today. But in addition I also wish to say, as part of our openness and transparency, for the very first time, the entire register of voters is online. Citizens can check whether they are registered or they are not registered. But we have deliberately removed certain fields. You will not see photographs, no biometrics, no telephone numbers, no residential addresses for reasons that you can understand. But every citizen can check online to confirm the status of his or her registration. We will continue to be open and transparent as we approach the 2019 general elections.

Ambassador Symington:

Thank you.

*****End Transcript*****