

3rd May 2024

**AN OPEN LETTER TO MR. PRESIDENT AND THE LEADERSHIP OF THE
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (NASS) ON THE DANGERS OF THE
RELOCATION OF AMERICAN AND FRENCH MILITARY BASES FROM
THE SAHEL TO NIGERIA**

Your Excellencies,

It is a common knowledge that the American and French governments have been desperately lobbying the governments of Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana to agree to sign new defense pacts that would enable them to redeploy their soldiers expelled from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Some of the troops have been redeployed to Chad but France and United States prefer countries of the Gulf of Guinea that are more strategically located to serve their interests in the central zone of the Sahel. Of the countries in the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria turns out to be the most strategically located. There are indications that the Nigerian Government may be favorably disposed to the proposed defense pact. However, there is a widespread apprehension that signing of the pact by Nigeria would have wide ranging implications for defense and internal security of the country.

On 22nd December 2023, the last of France's 1,500 troops deployed in Niamey and two other bases in the tri-frontier of Niger were marched out of the country. On March 16th, 2024, Niger Republic suspended the military agreement with the United States signed in 2012, which allowed the US to station about 1100 US troops and civilian personnel permanently in Niger, to operate from two American bases in the country. American Airbase 101 is located in Niamey while Airbase 201 is located near the small northern city of Agadez, about 920 kilometers southwest of Niamey. These French and American bases were used by the French and the Americans to carry out manned and unmanned surveillance flights and other operations in the Sahel. The bases had become the focal points for Western intelligence and surveillance operations in West Africa. The American and French troops were expelled because their presence did not serve any useful purpose. Instead, they were using the defense pact to carry out surveillance operations in the region to serve their geopolitical strategic interests. As a result of this expulsion, the Gulf of Guinea countries especially Nigeria, are being pressured to compromise their sovereignty by harboring these foreign troops who would come to serve the interests of NATO to the detriment of the national interests and security of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria's civil war experiences when France overtly supported the Biafran secessionists, and the ambivalence of the US should provide our leaders with food for thought.

It is important to remember that Nigerians have consistently opposed defense agreement with foreign countries since the 1960s when the Balewa administration was forced to abrogate the Anglo-Nigerian Defense Agreement, because the agreement

contained a clause which allowed the Royal Air force to overfly and test its aircrafts in Nigeria. The Agreement also allowed the Royal Air Force to station maintenance staff in Nigeria. The Balewa administration was pressured to abrogate the Agreement because public opinion perceived it as an impairment of Nigeria's freedom of action which might draw the country into hostilities against it wishes. This remains true.

In 2001, in his bid to ostensibly re-professionalize the Nigerian army, President Obasanjo almost unilaterally signed the "Military Cooperation Agreement Between the US and Nigeria." To its credit, the Ministry of Defense responded appropriately by opposing the agreement arguing that, the ministry was not involved in the negotiations between Nigeria and the US, neither were the service chiefs, who could have provided input relating to the syllabus and doctrinal content of the programme. In fact, the agreement was highly criticized by Lt General Victor Malu, the Chief of Army Staff at the time, when the US military officers demanded for Nigeria's strategic doctrine and unfettered access its strategic military locations. According to General Malu, those were "exclusive to Nigerians only" adding that "a friend today can be an enemy tomorrow." Malu was not alone in protest against the agreement. His immediate boss and Chief of Defense Staff, Vice Admiral Ibrahim Ogohi also told a visiting US Air College delegation to his office that "what Nigeria needs is logistic support and not training." In November 2007, the US renewed its attempt to set up its Africa Command (AFRICOM) in Nigeria. This move was rejected by the National Council of State. Incidentally President Bola Ahmed Tinubu was a member of the Council of State at the time.

The latest proposal to relocate the America from Niger to Nigeria coming not long after the suspension of Niger from ECOWAS, with Nigeria's active collaboration as a result of disagreement between Niger and the US, has many serious implications not only for Nigeria - Niger relations but also for Nigeria's national security and that of the West African region in general. According to the late Major General Joseph Garba, Nigeria's former Minister of External Affairs, Nigeria's neighbors are a matter of colonial heritage and socio-cultural diversity; but it is in our Nigeria's interest to deliberately cultivate the friendship of our neighbours. This posture has been and must continue to be a major feature of Nigeria's foreign policy. This is even more so because historically, there has always been a noticeable degree of suspicion of Nigeria's intentions among its French - speaking neighbors, arising no doubt from the mutual suspicion which seems to have always characterized Nigeria's relations with France. Therefore, in this circumstance Nigeria must be bold enough to reject the proposal, if for no other reason than to return a good turn. At least since independence Nigeria and Niger have maintained relatively cordial relations that have always helped in stabilizing the sub-region on several occasions. The two countries have come to the aid of one another during their moment of crises.

The new military rulers in Niger jettisoned the security cooperation agreement between Niger and the United States because of the "attitude of the US delegation which visited Niger recently "in denying the sovereign rights of Niger's people to choose their

partners and allies capable of really helping them to fight terrorism.” General Michael Langley, head of the African Command (AFRICOM) had expressed “concern” that Niger was cultivating close ties with Russia and Iran. Other reasons given for the abrogation of the agreement included the fact that the presence of the American troops in Niger was illegal. According to Amadou Abdramane the spokesperson for the Niger’s Military Council, “it was not democratically approved and imposes unfavorable conditions on Niger.” As the “Agreement” was simply a list of demands drawn by the US Embassy in Niger and sent to the Mahamadou Issoufou’s administration for its consent, which it willingly gave.

The Agreement for example provides that all United States personnel be accorded the privileges, exemptions, and immunities equivalent to those accorded to the administrative and technical staff of a diplomatic mission under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of April 18, 1961; that United States personnel may enter and exit the Republic of Niger with United States identification and with collective or individual travel order.

It is important to clearly state that there are only dangers and no gains from such military operations. The American operations in Niger Republic for example were ostensibly to pre-empt and uproot terrorists from the Sahelian region. The result has so far been quite unimpressive, if not a complete failure. It is apparent that the presence of American troops and other intelligence personnel in Niger Republic is not serving any useful purpose. This is for the simple reason that terrorism, far from abating, has in fact risen dramatically since the US began its operations in the region. Data sourced from the Pentagon, indicate that “with 2,737 violent events, the western Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Western Niger) experienced the largest escalation in violent event linked to militant Islamist groups over the past years of any region in Africa, a 36% increase.” ...” Fatalities in the Sahel involving militant Islamist groups rose even more rapidly, 63%, resulting in 7,899 fatalities. Niger in particular in particular “saw a 43% increase in violent events in the past year. “All told, ...attacks linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel have jumped 3,500% since 2016.” “At a minimum, more US security assistance isn’t leading to more security and all signs suggest it plays a role in making matters worse.” (Elizabeth Shackelford) “The Sahel now accounts for 40% of all violent activity by militant Islamist groups in Africa, more than any other region in Africa. ...Militant Islamist violence in the Sahel is also responsible for the displacement of more than 2.6 million people.” Are these results worth the erosion of sovereignty?

We the signatories of this open letter believe strongly that the economic and environmental impacts of hosting foreign military bases are profound and far-reaching. Economically, the presence of these bases could potentially divert government funds and resources away from critical areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development toward maintaining and securing these military installations. This redirection of resources could stunt economic growth and exacerbate poverty in a country where much of the population already lives under challenging conditions.

Moreover, hosting foreign troops often leads to increased prices and living costs in local areas, disproportionately affecting the lower-income population. Environmentally, the construction and operation of military bases can lead to significant degradation of the local environment. This includes deforestation, soil erosion, water contamination, and loss of biodiversity, which are detrimental to agricultural communities and indigenous populations. The long-term environmental damage could further hinder economic opportunities and sustainable development.

Historically, the presence of foreign military bases has often led to strained relations not only with neighboring countries but also within the host country itself, as seen in numerous global instances. Public opinion in Nigeria has consistently shown a strong resistance to foreign military alliances that compromise the nation's sovereignty and independence. The controversial history of foreign military presence in Nigeria, dating back to the abrogation of the Anglo-Nigerian Defense Agreement in the 1960s, serves as a significant historical precedent highlighting the potential risks and public discontent associated with such agreements. This historical awareness and skepticism are echoed in the present day, where there is considerable public apprehension towards the re-establishment of foreign military bases.

In conclusion, as stewards of Nigeria's sovereignty and guardians of its national interests, it is incumbent upon our leadership to heed the lessons of history and the voice of its people. The relocation of foreign military bases to Nigerian soil represents not just a potential compromise of our sovereignty but also sets a precedent that may lead to unforeseen geopolitical, economic, and social consequences. We, the signatories of this open letter, urge you to consider the broader implications of such agreements and to prioritize Nigeria's long-term peace and security over short-term strategic alignments. By standing firm against the pressures to house foreign bases, Nigeria can affirm its commitment to self-determination and foster a more stable and prosperous future for all its citizens. Let us choose a path of cautious diplomacy and strategic independence, ensuring that our nation remains a beacon of stability and a model of sovereign integrity in Africa.

Yours faithfully,

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