

III. Welcome and Opening Remarks

Gary Kenny, Chair of the Working Group in Nigeria, opened the conference, along with Stephen Lee, Director of the Center for Foreign Policy Development (DFAIT), and Dr. Edward Osei Kwadwo-Prempeh, Chair of the African Studies Committee, Carleton University.

Mr. Kenny noted that the Conference was taking place at a key moment in Nigeria's history, when the military regime of Abdulsalami Abubakar hands over power to the government of President-elect Olusegun Obasanjo. The Canadian government has a role to play in Nigeria's democratic transformation by supporting the country's return to civilian rule both bilaterally and through international fora. The hand-over date of May 29th, 1999 is a key moment. The Conference's purpose is therefore 1) to assess the post-election social and political environment in Nigeria, and 2) to create clear recommendations for Canada's foreign policy on Nigeria. It brings together key representatives of Nigerian civil society, Canadian agencies and research institutions, and representatives of DFAIT and CIDA.

The keynote address, on "Creating a Political Environment that Encourages Civil Society Participation in Governance", was given by Dr. M.T. Akobo, Director of the Southern Minorities Movement, on behalf of Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti, Chair of the Campaign for Democracy in Nigeria.

Dr. Akobo thanked the Canadian government for its principled stand in withdrawing its mission from Nigeria during the Abacha regime. He detailed some of the breakdowns in the economy, infrastructure and employment that have become steadily worse in recent years. Noting the present initiative to return to civilian rule via a transitional Government of National Unity, he expressed the hope that it would lead to a Sovereign National Conference which could renegotiate the constitution and provide the basis for democratic elections. He identified several contentious issues which need to be negotiated between north and south as well as between major nationalities and minorities, such as: restructuring the country and its institutions; resource allocation; and systems of government, including division of powers. Dr. Akobo concluded by calling for increased civil society participation in government to restore confidence and enable a new negotiated constitution to be developed.

Sandelle Scrimshaw, Director General of the Africa Bureau for DFAIT, responded to Dr. Akobo's remarks. [See Appendix D for Ms. Scrimshaw's prepared statement.]