



**KEY NOTE ADDRESS**

**BY**

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NIGERIA HIGH COMMISSIONER TO THE UNITED KINGDOM**

**AT THE CONFERENCE ON  
PREVENTING ABUSE OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD TODAY**

**BRUNEI GALLERY,  
SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES,  
RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON, 30 MAY 2009**

**Your Excellency, Obong Barrister Godswill Akpabio  
Governor of Akwa Ibo State**

**Baroness Morgan, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for  
Children, Young People and Families**

**Engineer Enenwan Ebong  
President of Mboho Akwa Ibom Association in the UK and Ireland  
and Executive Council Members of the Association**

**Gary Foxcroft, Programme Director, Stepping Stones Nigeria**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am delighted to be at this platform as a great opportunity to exchange views on children rights and protection in Nigeria, showcase Nigeria's record in this regard and deliberate on additional measures that need to be taken to advance the rights and welfare of the Nigerian Child.

Like everyone who watched the BBC Channel 4 documentary on ***Saving Africa's Witch Children*** when it was first broadcast on 12 November 2008, I was horrified at the sight of children being tortured, dehumanised and traumatised by their captors under the guise of exorcising witchcraft from their innocent souls. Some of them have already been killed. The gory scenes shown in the documentary were rightly met with universal condemnation; having pitched the conscience of the world.

In reacting to this documentary, my Mission proceeded to send a quick rejoinder, stating, unequivocally, its abhorrence of what was depicted in the programme. Rather than denying that such cultural practices and human rights violations of children exist in one form or the other various parts of Nigeria, the Mission sought to put the documentary in the proper

context of ignorance, mass illiteracy, cultural practices, belief systems, poverty and lack of enforcement of existing laws. Without doubt, such despicable practices could not take place or flourish, if these conditions do not exist, especially, in the rural areas.

As a Mission, it is my duty to ensure that Nigerian friends in the UK are fully informed of the steps the Federal Government of Nigeria has taken to promote and protect the rights of the Nigerian child. Let it be noted, in this regard, that the commitment of the Federal Government, remains strong and unassailable. This is clearly demonstrated by the domestication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, through the enactment of the Child Rights Act by the National Assembly in 2003. Nigeria is also a signatory to the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which was also domesticated in 2000.

At the level of implementation in the various States of the Federation, 21 out of the 36 States in Nigeria, including Akwa Ibom State, have so far passed the Child Rights Act, with many more set to do so. This is being promoted by the Federal Government through financial and other forms of assistance under the auspices of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Office in the Presidency.

Further more, simplified versions of the Act are being translated into the local languages in the States, to raise awareness and tackle the cultural practices that stigmatise and criminalise innocent children as witches.

With regard to child trafficking, may I also add that the Federal Government has deployed part of the debt-relief gains to support the

creation of four centres in the country for the rehabilitation of children rescued from traffickers. This is an essential part of the work of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) in this regard.

In tackling the menace of child witches and other harmful cultural practices in Nigeria, there is the need for closer collaboration between the three tiers of Government in the country. This requires the promotion of mass education, public awareness, media advocacy and sensitisation. Above all, it requires strong enforcement of the laws on child protection, as is currently being demonstrated by Akwa Ibom State Government.

In this connection, the role of community-based Organisations such as our host today, the **Mboho Akwa Ibo Association**, Non-Governmental Organisations like **Stepping Stones Nigeria**, the mass media and Nigeria's development partners cannot be over-emphasised. Religious leaders must also ensure that so-called deliverance services and purported exorcism, undertaken by some of their members in the name of religious revival and spiritualism, are devoid of torture, intimidation and other cruel and degrading treatment that clearly violate the rights of victims, including children. Humanity must not sit idly by and tolerate the kinds of despicable treatment that were shown in the documentary under reference.

## **Excellency**

### **Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

May I point out, at this juncture, that promoting the welfare and rights of the Nigerian Child also goes beyond the phenomenon of witchcraft. In

many parts of Nigeria, there are major issues and challenges of street children either as hawkers, petty thieves or beggars, including the *Almajiris*; girl-child education; early marriages and associated health hazards such as obstetric fistula; genital mutilation; child prostitution; children as domestic servants; children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and those living with HIV/AIDS, among others. Addressing these challenges requires a wholistic approach of comprehensive social policies, including universal basic education, youth empowerment, public enlightenment and greater awareness of the dangers and perils facing innocent children in various parts of the country.

In reporting and analysing events and social phenomenon in Nigeria, I wish to appeal to Nigeria's foreign friends, especially, the mass media, to demonstrate a greater understanding of the country's history, culture and social circumstances relative to others. An incomplete and distorted picture emerges when events in Nigeria are presented through foreign lenses and standards that fail to take into account the state of development and the socio-economic conditions of the generality of the people. I am however confident that, before long, Government socio-economic policies and programmes would begin to make the desired, positive impact on the lives of the people.

Under those circumstances, cultural practices and belief systems that flourish in conditions of poverty, social deprivation and mass illiteracy will give way to greater respect for human rights in all ramifications, including the welfare and rights of children.

At the end of this Conference, it is my hope that our friends and partners in the UK will be in a better position to determine what forms of additional assistance they can offer to the Federal and State Governments in Nigeria getting to the root of this problem. In this regard, there is the imperative need to enhance existing capacities of Governments to render greater protection to the Nigerian Child as vulnerable members of the society but on whose shoulders the future of our country and the world rest.

This conference, coming shortly after this year's commemoration of this year's National Children's Day in Nigeria, could not have come at a better time in focusing greater attention to the plight of children in Nigeria. Let me end by thanking the Mboho Akwa Ibom Association and Stepping Stones Nigeria for highlighting this particular problem at this material time.

I also welcome to our midst, the Governor of Akwa Ibom State and his delegation and wish to thank them for honouring us with their presence. Your participation will no doubt enrich our discussions and foster a better appreciation of the steps the State Government has taken and the challenges it faces in the promotion and protection of the rights of the child in the Akwa Ibom State in particular and Nigeria in general.

I thank you for your attention.