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## Event Report

# Mallam Nuhu Ribadu: Fighting Corruption in Nigeria

APRIL 5, 2007

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*On April 5, 2007, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, executive director of Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), spoke at Columbia Business School during an event sponsored by the Columbia Business School Social Enterprise Program, the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs and Columbia University's Human Rights Institute. Mr. Ribadu received Nigeria's Inspector General of Police Awards in 1997, 1998 and 2000, and in 1999 he received the Special Commendation of the Accountant General of the Federation for successfully prosecuting some corrupt public servants. He was voted Man of the Year in 2004 and 2005 by notable Nigerian newspapers, including ThisDay, the Sun, Leadership, the Nigerian Tribune and NewAge, in recognition of his outstanding achievements in fighting against corruption, often at great personal risk to himself. In his speech, Mr. Ribadu addressed the issues of the anticorruption activities of the EFCC, its challenges and successes and his view of Nigeria's future and how it impacts the world.*

Modern-day Nigeria started in 1960 and for a while seemed to accept the meritocracy preached by the country's founders. The early leaders Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe were the most capable of their generation, and as the premiers of the first three regions—North, West and East, respectively—they based their policies on the hopefulness and idealism that newly formed countries aspire to. The high expectations set by the early leaders, who are still honored for their work, have unfortunately not been met by most of the succeeding ruling regimes.

Through 1966, Nigeria enjoyed life as an upwardly mobile nation, with a gross domestic product (GDP) growing at about 7 percent per annum and an income doubling every 13 years. Two things fundamentally changed the nation: the military intervention of 1966 and the emergence of crude oil as the economic mainstay. The two brought in their wake pervasive corruption, which

has sapped the nation's economic, political and social vitality. Sadly, roughly \$500 billion has been lost or stolen over the past 30 years,\* and despite being the world's sixth-largest oil producer, Nigeria remains one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the world.

However, a new generation of Nigerian leaders who can take the country out of its current problems may be emerging. Among this internationally recognized group is Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) chairman. As chairman, Mr. Ribadu has established an organization—the first organization of its kind in all of Africa—that is being looked at as an anticorruption model for developing countries throughout the world.

While corruption is not exclusive to Africa, the problem is particularly acute there. Mr. Ribadu made clear that corruption is the root of so many of Africa's problems: poverty, undereducation and disease. Accordingly, he also made clear that if the Western world wants to fight poverty and terrorism in Africa, it must start with corruption, as it drains resources and warps the lens of decision making. Mr. Ribadu called on Western countries, especially the United States, to do more by imposing stricter controls on the global banking system not only for antiterrorism purposes but also for anticorruption.

Nigeria has become infamous throughout the globe for its corruption, often occupying one of the top rankings in Transparency International's annual survey. Corruption at the top has seeped into the rest of society, encouraging otherwise intelligent people to engage in scams as a way to make a livelihood, rather than by more honest means. As a result, broken contracts have multiplied, failed banks have increased in number and domestic and global advanced fee fraud, or 419 crimes, have escalated. Crime has become lucrative in Nigeria—as long as the criminal is able to make enough money to bribe officials or establish the right connections. By 2001, there was no country in the world that had not been invaded by Nigerians perpetrating 419 crimes.

Today, prominent bankers, former ministers, senators, party members and large 419 operators have either been convicted or are facing prosecution. Still, those doubting the will of the EFCC chairman point to those covered by immunity—the president, the vice president, the governors and the deputy governors—as proof that the EFCC is incapable of taking on tough cases. Although the arrest and conviction of Tafa Balogun, former inspector general of police, followed by the arrest and prosecution of Diepreye Alamiyeseigha, former governor of Bayelsa State, were hailed as a start, some accuse the EFCC of not pursuing other officials with strong political connections.

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\**ThisDay*, April 17, 2007.

This situation became evident during a passionate debate by guests attending the talk with the EFCC chairman. Mr. Ribadu strongly denied any political leanings. He did, however, recognize that there are barriers to what he would like to do ideally, but he added that those should not take away from the extraordinary achievements to date, relative to Nigeria's past.

Mr. Ribadu mentioned that the antigraft agency has so far recovered \$3 billion from different people participating in illegal activities. During his talk, he pointed to the political elites as the problem, accusing them of disgracing the country. "We must do everything possible to expose them," he said. "Once we go after 419 and bankruptcy, these so-called elites will be clapping their hands. But once we go after them [the elites], they will start calling us names." He said that the EFCC had spent some \$39 million in its four years of existence and that every dollar spent will go to return money back to people who were scammed inside and outside Nigeria.

Considering Nigeria's track record and that the EFCC is the only serious anticorruption effort on the continent, the achievements recorded by Mr. Ribadu will be regarded as one of the most remarkable in modern Africa. He pointed out that the \$18 billion of debt forgiveness received by Nigeria from Western donors has been very helpful in reinvigorating the country's economic fortunes. Western donors pointed out that Nigeria's anticorruption drive was one of the key factors that led to the forgiveness of debt. If pursued long and vigorously enough, the EFCC anticorruption campaign will help restore the virtues that made Nigeria a growing and increasingly prosperous nation before the military coup of 1966.

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