

**Australia Day Reception, Speech by High Commissioner
23 January 2015, Abuja.**

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow Australians.

This is the first national Day of the year for Abuja's diplomatic community. So allow me to welcome back all those who have had a holiday or at least a small break; and to wish everyone a happy new year.

Being the first cab off the rank, so to speak, does not necessarily make it my job to give a comprehensive review of the past calendar year, 2014. But given the times we live in, it is hard to resist the temptation to reflect briefly on how Australia, Nigeria and the international community as a whole have fared over the last year.

Both Nigeria and Australia achieved important milestones last year. Nigeria's celebrated the centenary of its foundation as a single entity; as well as the rebasing of Nigeria's GDP, placing it as the largest economy in Africa – underlining the great potential offered by Nigeria that many of us were already conscious of.

Nigeria's success in eliminating the threat of contagion from Ebola was one bright spot in what was otherwise a very bleak and tragic picture elsewhere in West Africa - although it is pleasing to note that in recent weeks the number of new cases has started to fall in the three countries most affected.

Australia's economic mood was less buoyant last year thanks to falling commodity prices, but we did maintain our record of 24 years consecutive positive growth, without recession – the only OECD country to do so.

Some of Australia's most notable achievements were perhaps on the international front. We hosted a successful G20 Summit in Brisbane in November, and Australia also concluded Free Trade Agreements with China, Japan and the Republic of Korea – really big milestones, as these are our first, second and fourth largest trading partners respectively.

In bilateral terms, I would highlight the establishment of a Nigerian-Australian Alumni Association, formed by a core of Nigerians who have attended Australian universities under our Australia Awards scheme of postgraduate scholarships and professional development. We welcome a number of those alumni here this evening.

2014 also saw the conclusion of our Australia's term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, on which Nigeria was a fellow member. We believe we made a practical and innovative contribution to the work of the Council, including a number of initiatives in our Presidency of the Council in November.

These were aimed in particular at

- improving the effectiveness of the UN sanctions,
- promoting policing as a key component of UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations

- and strengthening international cooperation to combat terrorism, foreign terrorist fighters and violent extremism.

One important but largely unheralded milestone for the international community was the entry into force on Christmas Eve of the Arms Trade Treaty – a development Australia had worked very hard with our friends in ECOWAS to achieve.

Nevertheless, it was hard to escape the sense that, thanks to terrorism and other threats to international peace and security, 2014 ended and 2015 began on a very sombre note.

As Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, said in a speech at the Brookings Institution in Washington on Wednesday this week, terrorism is now more global, more dangerous, more diversified than ever before.

Terrorist groups have emerged or grown in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen, and Nigeria and its neighbours.

Da'esh (or ISIL) has declared a caliphate - putting whole villages, towns, cities and vital infrastructure in Syria and Iraq under its ruthless governance.

Boko Haram has also declared a caliphate and taken control of large parts of North-Eastern Nigeria, as well as inflicting terror on ordinary civilians in a number of cities through bombings.

The hostage taking incident in downtown Sydney in December, along with other tragic so-called lone wolf attacks in France, Canada, Belgium and elsewhere have brought home the global reach of extremism and the challenge of foreign fighters and returnees. More than ever, we need to join together to defeat this threat.

As part of its efforts to that end, Australia has offered its support to Nigeria in the struggle to defeat Boko Haram. In particular, we are supporting initiatives of the Office of the NSA to counter the spread of violent extremism through practical programs in schools and communities. We have also supported such institutions as the Centre for Quranic Studies in Kano which is encouraging discussion of how the Islamic education curriculum can promote non-radical messages of understanding and social cohesion

While 2015 has not started well in terms of the continued depredations by Boko Haram in Borno State and elsewhere, the international community stands behind Nigeria in the fervent hope that it will achieve success this year in containing and defeating the insurgency.

With Boko Haram spreading further into neighbouring countries and posing a broader threat, cooperation between regional countries is clearly of vital importance. In this regard we welcome the commitment of the Lake Chad basin countries to strengthen their cooperation through the Joint Multinational Task Force and encourage them to implement that commitment as effectively as possible. The strong position and support of the African Union is also welcome.

Of course, looking forward to 2015 – the elections. There is no need to remind you of the significance of Nigeria's national and state elections next month - not only for Nigeria but for Africa as a whole, where some 10 countries are preparing to hold democratic elections this year.

Australia wishes Nigeria every success in holding a free, fair, credible and above all peaceful election.

In that context, we welcome the conclusion of the Abuja Accord last week committing all the major political parties to refrain from violent acts and inflammatory speech. It is essential they take appropriate actions to implement the pact.

Like many international observers we are confident that the Independent National Electoral Commission has been committed to deliver well run and credible elections in often challenging circumstances. It is important that all other stakeholders, in particular candidates and their parties, security agencies and the courts, share the responsibility of delivering credible elections with INEC. In particular, it will be important that they work with INEC to ensure that all eligible voters have the opportunity to participate in the elections, where it is safe to do so.

I am sure, like the rest of the international community, Australia joins the overwhelming majority of Nigerians in their ambition that the elections will be a celebration of democracy – a success story and a milestone in Nigeria's political evolution.

Also thank my own staff for their hard work over the last year as well for their fine efforts in arranging today's reception.

On that note, propose toast: to bilateral relations between Nigeria and Australia, and to successful and peaceful elections in Nigeria.