Mr. President, Honorable Members of the European Parliament,

It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss with you the situation in Nigeria on behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Ashton.

Nigeria is at a crucial juncture. President Jonathan’s reform policy can shape Nigeria’s future. Its democracy is consolidating and its economy is growing rapidly. Nigeria has the potential to become the biggest economy in Sub-Saharan Africa within a few years. It plays a major role in the African continent, it was a member of the Security Council last year and is a member of the Human Rights Commission this year. Former president Obasanjo recently led the Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union mission to Dakar to monitor the elections and send a strong message in support of democracy and people's rights.

I would like to thank you, Honorable Members, for your interest in Nigeria the past months. I say this with particular conviction, because I had the pleasure of representing High Representative/Vice-President Ashton at the recent Ministerial meeting with Nigeria in Abuja on 8 February. It was a remarkable occasion and a very positive one.

Nigeria still faces crucial challenges:

The European Union strongly condemns the recent attacks carried out by Boko Haram, with appalling loss of human lives. The Christmas bombings of churches and the recent suicide attack on a church in Jos on 26 February and again on 11 March are deeply shocking. So are all of the other attacks, including that in Kano some weeks ago.

Unfortunately, the number of attacks and human losses are increasing every day in an unacceptable spiral of violence. High Representative Ashton has repeatedly expressed her solidarity and sympathy with the victims, the injured and their families.
I also wish to make use of this opportunity to express our profound sadness by the loss of life of two European hostages in Nigeria on the 8th of March. We condemn in the strongest possible terms criminal actions such as the taking of hostages. Our heartfelt condolences go to their families for the irreplaceable loss they have faced. May they find strength at this difficult time.

The EU stands alongside the Nigerian authorities in their fight against terrorism, to protect all citizens, in particular the most vulnerable, and to preserve the right to life and the rule of law.

The root causes of Boko Haram are many, but it is no coincidence that it is strongest in the North of the country, which has some of the worst socio-economic indicators in Africa. Nigeria's North East is one of the world's forgotten emergencies: the grievances there need to be addressed urgently, and we as partners and friends have promised the government to help them do so.

Boko Haram targets equally the secular democratic state, Muslims and Christians. Nigeria remains a secular state with religious freedom firmly enshrined in its Constitution. However, Boko Haram is trying to exploit the ethno-religious differences, which will always exist in a country as big and diverse as Nigeria. Nigeria's complex problems certainly have religious dimensions, but they cannot simply be blamed on religion. We have a well-established regular local human rights dialogue with Nigeria, during which all important issues including freedom of religion or belief are raised. The most recent such dialogue meeting took place in February this year. The EU is committed to supporting the Government and people of Nigeria in avoiding religion being misused to legitimize politically or criminally motivated violence.

I would like to add that the EU has been very active on the issue of freedom of religion or belief, especially during the last two years, as many countries – and not only Nigeria – have experienced a surge of acts of religious hatred and violence.

We have used our full range of instruments, either bilaterally or in multilateral fora, in New York and Geneva, to be at the forefront of the fight against religious intolerance.

And we will continue to do so: all EU delegations have been requested to follow closely the situation of their host countries and report on issues and actions taken. As required by the EU Foreign Affairs Ministers in February 2011, the overall action of the EU in this respect should be reviewed by the Foreign Affairs Council in the coming months.

To come back to Nigeria, there are fortunately some positive signs of Nigerians taking initiatives to ease the situation, such as the Association of Muslim Students, which exposes on Facebook the fallacies of Boko Haram. Important leaders of Islam in Nigeria have rejected Boko Haram as misguided and murderous fanatics. Nigeria's Catholic bishops have highlighted that the Boko Haram crisis has also brought the best out of many Nigerians such as Muslims and Christians protecting each other. The Government is also making progress in developing and implementing a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy and several prominent Boko Haram members have been arrested. During my meetings with the Nigerian Government in February, I encouraged them to explore this more holistic counter-terrorism strategy further.

Nigeria matters to the wider world. It plays a valuable stabilizing role in the region. It is the 4th largest oil exporter in the world and the second most important exporter of liquefied natural gas to the EU. Nigeria is firmly committed to the UN, a major provider of UN peacekeepers and is vocal and robust in its support for democracies and freedom. Nigeria's positions in the recent Ivorian and Libyan crises speak for themselves. In short, I found a strong and open African partner, which in many ways shares our views and our values.
The Ministerial meeting resulted in several openings, which we shall now explore further. One is the agreement to establish a local dialogue on peace, security and stability, and others are Nigeria’s interest in climate change and Rio+20.

It was interesting to hear from the Nigerian leaders how they see their economy developing. They are diversifying to reduce their dependence on oil and gas; investing in infrastructure and agriculture; and focusing on job creation for their young and growing population of 160 million people. I heard many times that Nigeria strongly encourages European investment and participation in its strong growth.

On the other hand Nigeria faces serious challenges, not least to alleviate widespread poverty. Improving governance, maintaining ethnic harmony and fighting corruption and crime certainly also require continuous efforts. Though Nigeria's human rights record has improved steadily in recent years, there are still areas where further improvement could be achieved.

The security situation in the Niger Delta, although improving, remains fragile. The region is vital for the national economy because of its oil production so ensuring its peaceful development is equally vital. The EU is currently implementing a €200 Million program to assist the development of the region.

Bricks, stones and words can be used to separate people, but they can also build bridges.

Honorable Members,

I call upon you to use your contacts with Nigerians to support and to facilitate this absolutely essential bridge building with Nigeria and I look forward to the resolution that the EP will adopt tomorrow.

Thank you.