

Viewing cable 01ABUJA1590, NIGERIA NOT LIKELY TO SUPPORT OAU DRAFT BIOSAFETY

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
01ABUJA1590	2001-07-05 15:42	2011-08-30 01:44	UNCLASSIFIED	Embassy Abuja

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS ABUJA 001590

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR OES/ETC, EB/ATT/BTT, AF/EOS
USDA FOR FAS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ETRD](#) [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA NOT LIKELY TO SUPPORT OAU DRAFT BIOSAFETY
LAW

REF: STATE 101886

¶1. (U) EconOff met July 2 with the Director of the National Biotechnology Program, Professor C. Omaliko, to discuss, per reftel, the OAU Draft Biosafety Law adopted by a technical committee May 2-5 in Addis Ababa. The National Biotechnology Program falls under the aegis of the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology. According to Omaliko, reftel information sent to the Ministry on June 27 came as a surprise. He expressed outrage that the draft law had not been brought to his Ministry's attention by the Nigerian delegation to Addis Ababa. Omaliko noted that despite joint responsibility for the issue, only the Ministries of Environment and Foreign Affairs were represented at the OAU meeting in May.

¶2. (U) Omaliko thanked EconOff for sending reftel information "in time to halt Nigeria's endorsement of the draft law." He said, "No way should Nigeria agree to this law. It is not in our national interest." Once he had received the information, Omaliko said, he met with Minister of Science and Technology Turner Isoun to discuss strategy and started drafting a memo to President Obasanjo that lays out the Ministry's objections to the OAU Draft Biosafety Law. Paging through the draft, Omaliko pointed out several of these objections. First, the risk assessment definitions contained in the draft law are far too broad. Second, the draft sets no time limit on making decisions for or against GMOs and any decision,

according to the law, would be provisional.

¶3. (U) Omaliko explained that Nigeria is the first African country to have a national biosafety protocol. (The protocol is awaiting final approval by the Executive Council (equivalent of the U.S. Cabinet).) He noted that biotechnology is one of Minister Isoun's top two priorities and is supported by President Obasanjo. Omaliko said that his memo to the President, which he would complete that same day, would recommend that Nigeria halt discussions within the OAU regarding biosafety until the GON has reached internal consensus on the issues.

¶4. (U) Omaliko went on to explain that the GON is in touch with U.S. biotech company Monsanto and that he had personally set up a GON trade mission to the U.S. earlier this year to meet with company representatives and USDA and EPA to discuss regulatory issues. Omaliko commented that Monsanto representatives from South Africa would be in Abuja next week to meet with the Ministers of Agriculture and Science and Technology to discuss further areas for collaboration.

¶5. (U) Comment. The position of the Ministry of Science and Technology is to promote the development of the biotech industry in Nigeria as demonstrated by existing and continuing support for several biotechnology research centers, with particular focus on agricultural products. However, the position of the Ministry of Environment, particularly the perspective of Deputy Minister Okopido, is in support of strident biosafety legislation. At this juncture, it is likely that the voice of caution from the Ministry of Science and Technology will prevail regarding the OAU Draft Biosafety Law. End Comment.
Jeter