

LEAD DEBATE ON THE NIGERIAN PEACE CORPS BILL

Sponsored By: Rt. Hon. Orker-Jev E.Y.

Mr. Speaker,

For the umpteenth time, circumstances have made it necessary for us to revisit the Nigerian Peace Corps (Establishment) Bill 2017 that this Honourable House passed and transmitted to Mr. President for his Assent, which he declined.

This Bill seeks to provide for an Act to establish the Nigerian Peace Corps (NPC) to Develop, Empower, and Provide Gainful Employment for the youths to facilitate Peace, Volunteerism, Community Services, Neighbourhood Watch, Nation-building and for other related matters.

The dynamic nature of insecurity in Nigeria today requires role differentiation as a panacea to expertise in addressing security challenges. It also requires multi- sectoral, multi- lateral and multi- dimensional approaches to tackle. In more advanced societies, youth based Organizations like the Nigerian Peace Corps, are established with the sole aim of engaging and preoccupying the youths as a panacea to the social consequences of been unemployed. Similar Organisations that exist in other parts of the world are: the American Peace Corps, Canadian Peace Corps, Bangladesh National Cadet Corps, Peace Officers Commission in China, Chinese Labour Corps, Lera Uniform Corps of Malaysia, Malaysian People Volunteer Corps, Production and Construction Corps of China, etc. All these are consciously and deliberately designed to empower and socially preoccupy the youths so that their state of idleness won't be exploited adversely.

The unemployment situation has made our youths susceptible to the culture of violence with grave implications for the Security situation in Nigeria. In more developed economies, efforts are tailored towards the pre-occupation of the youths in productive ventures where they will be economically useful to themselves and the larger Society. This is in addition to engaging them in moral, citizenship and leadership training aimed at Character Building and their participation in nation building. In the United States of America, for example, the American Peace Corps was created as an Agency to promote World Peace and Friendship by training American youths as volunteers to perform social and humanitarian services overseas, including Nigeria. The volunteers help communities in developing Countries improve their Social and Economic conditions.

According to figures from the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics in the last National Census in Nigeria, the Youths accounted for upwards of 75% of total Nigerian Population with a staggering unemployment rate averaging 11.59% between 2006 and 2015. This rate was stated to have reached an all-time high at 23.90% in the 4th quarter of 2011.

In a related development, according to one of its reports, the United Nations Economic Commission for West African States damningly revealed that every year, over 900,000 Nigerian Youths graduates from both Secondary and Tertiary Institutions with only less than 10% of them having access to gainful employment. The fate of the remaining percentage was posited to end up in Armed Robbery, Militancy, Prostitution, Political Thuggery, Drug Trafficking, Financial Crimes, Terrorism and other Heinous Crimes.

The Nigerian Peace Corps, if given statutory Status, will adequately address youth unemployment and its social consequences as a Government Agency to handle issues relating to character formation through engagement in the educational institutions. This will specifically focus on the vices of cultism, examination malpractice and other criminal acts engaged in by our ever teeming student population; alongside provision of security services in the educational institutions to forestall past incidences of school raids and students kidnappings or abductions.

To adequately pre-occupy a substantial number of our youths, the Nigerian Peace Corps (NPC) will extend its services to the following areas such as: To Train and Equip the Youths with knowledge for Peace Education, Conflict Mediation, Intervention, Reconciliation and Confidence Building;

- i. Training Nigerian Youths with good virtuous, strong passion and commitment to the Art of Patriotism, Community Services and Nation-Building;
- ii. Involving members of the Peace Corps in Community Services such as Immunization, Census and Sanitation Exercises, especially in Urban Cities, States and Local Government Capitals;
- iii. Creating a Data Bank and a Reservoir of trained, qualified professional and non-professional youths for easy accessibility of manpower from the pool of well-groomed youths whenever the Nation needs their services for either permanent employment or ad-hoc Staff for such National and International programmes as Emergency Relief Services, Voters' Registration, Election Exercise, etc;
- iv. Engaging members as Tourists Assistants and guide, to Nigerians and foreigners on visit to the Country, Tour Sites and other National and State Monuments & Heritage; etc

In discharging its core mandates, the Nigerian Peace Corps will work directly with communities on their most pressing needs, by using its youthful disposition as a competitive advantage to achieve its Aims. The Corps will serve as a reservoir of well-groomed youths and a springboard as career development Agency for Government, Non-profit Organizations, Academic Institutions and Private Sectors.

As a matter of fact, this Bill seeks to give statutory functions to the existing Peace Corps of Nigeria which currently has over 157,000 members comprising of regular Staff and Volunteers with well-structured network of branches in 36 States of the Federation, including the Federal Capital Territory.

It would be recalled that the Bill was passed on its merit, considering the high level of its acceptability across the Federation. In all, over 574 Memoranda and Oral Presentations were made during the Public Hearing organized by this Honourable House and the Senate which most religious organisations, Traditional Institutions, Federal Government Ministries and Agencies, State Governments, State Houses of Assembly, Civil Society Organizations, Non-Governmental Organisations, youth and Student bodies that participated in the public hearing overwhelmingly supported the Bill. Of the written and oral presentations made, 95% were in support of the Bill, as against 5% that were opposed to it. Your guess as to those opposed to the Bill is as good as mine.

And to further underscore the high level of acceptability of the Nigerian Peace Corps Bill, opinion polls conducted by the Nation Newspaper, Naija.com and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA-Good Morning Nigeria) revealed that 89%, 76% and 97% respectively supported the establishment of the Nigerian Peace Corps. Similarly, Premium Times, an online publication and Punch Newspaper conducted opinion poll on the Bill and returned a favourable verdict of 85% and 93% respectively in its support. On this note, if public opinion matters in modern democracy, we as the true representatives of the people should once again lend this Bill our overwhelming support.

I wish to also state it here that unlike other Bills that the President withheld his assent on the grounds of his discomfort with some of their provisions, he did not raise any objection to any portion of the NPC Bill when he declined his assent, a clear indication of the thoroughness of our job on the Bill. The President only cited lack of funds and security concerns as his reasons for vetoing the Bill.

Isn't it better or more rational to expend resources on empowering and building the capacity of our teeming unemployed youths as against using billions of naira on procuring arms to enforce peace, law and order? After all, it is said that when you spend more in peace time, you spend less in war time.

As a matter of fact, no amount of money spent by the government through the Peace Corps to free millions of our youths from the clutches of unemployment, idleness and crime should be considered too much, unless the government is merely paying lip service to youth empowerment.

In conclusion, it is worthy of note that in spite of their level of sophistication and attainment in armament and weaponry, the Arab Nations are currently toying with the idea of setting up Peace Corps in their various countries as a panacea to the security challenges confronting them. It is on this note that I crave the indulgence of my Honourable Colleagues to expedite action on this Bill in the interest of millions of Nigerian youths and allow it to pass again the second time.