

ADDRESS BY THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, RT. HON. FEMI
GBAJABIAMILA ON THE RESUMPTION OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FOR THE 2020
LEGISLATIVE SESSION ON THE 28TH OF JANUARY 2020.

PROTOCOLS

Good morning honourable colleagues. I welcome you all back to the chambers after the Christmas and New Year holidays and I thank you all for being here this morning. Though the House has not been in session these past few weeks, I am aware that for many of us, the work has never stopped and the obligations we hold have not been any less demanding. Still, I hope that you have taken time to rest, to recover and to prepare yourselves for the responsibilities that will continue to demand our time, our abilities and our continued efforts.

Yesterday, we stood to observe a moment's silence in memory of our colleague Hon. Muhammadu Fagen-Gawo, who passed away recently. My dear colleagues, this 9th House of Representatives has in its very short lifetime suffered the loss of too many of our members. I am deeply troubled by this development. Yes, it is God who gives life and it is God who takes life. We will not question the decisions of our maker. Nonetheless, allow me to say once more as I have said before in this chamber that faithful execution of the responsibilities of our office requires of us that we pay close attention to our personal health. This is still very true. Beyond the obligations of our office, we have other responsibilities as fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters that require us to take matters of our personal health with the utmost care. Let us never lose sight of this fact. And may God guide, protect and keep us all in good health and good fortune.

Upon the inauguration of this 9th House of Representatives in June 2019, we hit the ground running, working with the executive, and engaging the citizens of our country to discover and present solutions to the problems of our country. Some of our efforts have already yielded positive results in certain regards and I am hopeful that we will continue in this new year to meet and exceed the standards that we have set for ourselves.

For the first time since 1999, we have a budget passed by the legislature and signed into law before the start of the implementation year. I commend and thank all the members of this House for your efforts towards achieving early passage of the Appropriation Act 2020 and the Finance Act, both of which have now been signed into law by His Excellency, President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR. Honourable colleagues, passing the budget into law is merely the beginning. We now have a duty to ensure faithful compliance with the letter and spirit of the law by the ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) of the Federal Government. We will carry out this responsibility and we will do so with integrity, taking pains to ensure that we leave no room for neither friends nor foes to find fault with our words or deeds.

That Appropriation Act reflects the priorities of this government. These priorities are the same today as they have always been; to develop public infrastructure to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population, to facilitate investment in new and existing industries; to provide educational opportunities for all our people, and build an economy that allows

every citizen to achieve their just ambitions. Our role as legislators is to ensure that the agencies responsible for implementing this budget maintain fidelity to these priorities. We will not be afraid to hold people's feet to the fire where necessary. Where it is required of us that we act to review and update legislation, we will do so too. We will not act alone; we will not be arbitrary in our interventions. We will seek collaboration as a matter, of course, so that our interventions do not exacerbate existing problems or create new ones.

In this new year, this House will further take all necessary action to pass into law the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB) and to implement the much needed and long-delayed reforms of the sector. It is an unavoidable truth that the oil and gas industry is integral to the economic life of Nigeria. Achieving efficient operation in this sector is, therefore, a matter of national survival. We cannot allow these much-needed and too long-delayed reforms to continue to be hostage to the privileged interests of a few or the myopic considerations of those whose interests are served by the status quo. We will seek reform, we will achieve reform, and we will do so in collaboration with the executive, with stakeholders in the industry and with those communities that most directly bear the highest costs of our exploration and sale of fossil fuels.

In 2019, the House of Representatives led interventions to address the challenges faced by the less abled amongst our citizens. We observed the International Day of People with Disabilities with an event here in the National Assembly, which was intended first to highlight the many challenges faced by those of our citizens with disabilities, and then to build support for necessary action to address those challenges. On that day, we renewed our commitment to take all necessary action to promote accessibility for the less abled, bring down those barriers that stand in the way of their highest aspirations and build a future free of the injustices that limit them and condemn us all. The House of Representatives will live up to those commitments, and we will do so expeditiously through legislative action and through collaboration with stakeholders across the country, in government and in the private sector.

Honourable colleagues, the ongoing evolution of our nation's democracy requires of us that we continually review and update the rules of our engagement. We have just emerged from an elections season that for its numerous successes, nonetheless exposed significant gaps in the process that if left unaddressed, threaten our democracy. Electoral reforms are not a party political issue, they are a matter of loyalty to an ideal that is greater than the party to which one belongs to, or the personal ambitions we may each hold. Electoral reforms are a matter of our nation's future, and I ask of you all that when the time comes to achieve the reforms we need, we do so with the utmost commitment to fairness and equity, respect for the rule of law and with abiding hope for a better future for all our people.

There are a number of other initiatives we began in 2019 that require our continued commitment. These include efforts by the House to see to the full and profitable operation of the Warri, Port – Harcourt, Calabar, Onne and Onitsha Inland Ports; reforms of the power sector to ensure fairness in the billing system as well as allow for the development of an industry that is attractive to investment and capable of serving the best interests of the Nigerian people. We will not relent in pursuing these goals, as creating economic

opportunity for all our people helps us solve the other problems that threaten the continued viability of the Nigerian state.

Honourable colleagues, since we last convened in these chambers, there have been developments in the public space that concern us. We have witnessed across the country, a recognisable uptick in crime, manifested through the activities of bandits destroying communities, kidnappers operating for profit and insurgents seeking to remake our world in the image of a discredited theocracy.

All people of conscience mourn the loss of a reverend and a senior member of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Adamawa State, Mr Lawan Adimi, a good and honourable man, who through the church and in his personal capacity served the people of his community earning their reverence and our collective gratitude. In the midst of our mourning, our hearts were broken once more by the release of a video depicting the gruesome assassination of Mr Ropvil Dalep Daciya, a student from Plateau State who was abducted by suspected Boko Haram terrorists on his way back to school at the University of Maiduguri.

God forbid that it is now our nation's fate to live forever under the threat of abduction and murder. What gaps and weaknesses continue to exist in the national security infrastructure that makes us more susceptible to the machinations of those who seek to achieve wealth and power through brutal violence? How do we achieve for all our people, a just and honourable peace? These questions are never too far from my mind, and I know that it is the same for you too because often it is you who are at the frontlines responding to the concerns of constituents who have themselves been victimised and those who fear that the moment of their own affliction is only a matter of time and circumstance.

Honourable colleagues, this House will shortly take action to put these questions before those agencies of our national security to whom our constitution and other legislation have granted the powers and the resources to ensure the safety and security of all our people. Our cup of endurance has run over and we are no longer willing to labour under these dark clouds of random violence inflicted upon our people by faceless cowards whose ends we do not understand, and whose means we do not know. Overcoming our overwhelming national security challenges now requires of us all that we be willing to accept new approaches and consider novel ideas. Neither the security institutions nor political leaders can afford to hold on too tightly to a status quo whose frustrating limitations are painfully evident, whilst reflexively rejecting innovations that may improve our fortunes if properly implemented.

Recently, the Governors of Lagos, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, Oyo and Ondo states took action to implement a regional security network to support the efforts of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) in preventing crime and protecting the lives and property of those our citizens who live, work and travel through these states. The establishment of Àmòtèkùn, as the network is called, has met with commentary from across the country, both for and against. Too often, it has seemed to me that lost in these interactions is the hard, brutal and unavoidable fact that Àmòtèkùn and other such state or zonal interventions that already quietly exist in other parts of the country are a desperate response to the vile manifestations of insecurity

that trouble the lives of citizens, depriving them of the peace and security that gives life meaning.

I do not know that Àmòtèkùn or whatever iterations of it may follow represents the ultimate or perfect solution to the problem of insecurity in our country. Nobody does that. What I do know with absolute clarity and certainty is that the localised manifestations of insecurity across the different parts of our country call for unique and localised approaches that take those peculiarities into account. What I also know, is that whichever approach we seek, we are obligated to work within the limits imposed by the constitution to which we all swear allegiance. Above all else, I am certain in the knowledge that doing nothing is not an option. We have a responsibility as legislators to support the best efforts of those who act with noble intent to protect our citizens.

I, therefore, call on the Leader of the House of Representatives and the Minority Leader to take active steps to bring to the floor, appropriate amendments to the constitution that will ensure that these and other righteous interventions to protect the life and property of our citizens are firmly in compliance with the laws of the land.

Honourable colleagues, I invite you now to avert your minds to the matter of the millions of Nigerian children and teenagers who are out of school across the country. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that about 10.5 million of our nation's children aged between five (5) and fourteen (14) years are not in school. The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) puts the number higher at 13.2 million. Personally, I believe these numbers to be low estimates, but regardless of which number you accept, we cannot escape the conclusion that we have on our hands a huge problem, a clear and present danger the consequences of which are too dire to ignore.

Everywhere you go in the big cities of Nigeria, we now have on our streets, legions of children begging for alms from sunup till past dusk. These millions of young people with neither the training nor the awareness they need to survive, to contribute to, and to benefit from the 21st-century knowledge economy are victims of the broken promises of our nationhood. They are at risk of exploitation, vulnerable to recruitment by human and organ traffickers, by criminal elements, and insurgents. Their fate is inextricably bound to the fate of Nigeria. If we work to give them a future of prosperity and progress, we will achieve the same outcomes for Nigeria. If we condemn them to a future of deprivation and exploitation, that too will be our collective fate.

I, therefore, propose that this House of Representatives resolves to dedicate a special plenary session with nothing else on the order paper, save to consider the issue of Nigeria's millions of out of school children, with a special focus on the fate of Almajiri children in Nigeria. This will be an open session and all members are enjoined to develop proposals for consideration, for debate and adoption by the House. We do not intend for our deliberations and resolutions on this important issue to languish unattended. Therefore, we will extend invitations to the various ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) of government who have roles to play and we will seek the participation of non-governmental organisations who have a proven track record of successful interventions in this regard. In

this way, we can hope to achieve immediate implementation and measurable improvement of these dire statistics.

The age of rapid movement of millions of people responding to the demands of global trade every so often throws up challenges we must confront and overcome. The recently discovered coronavirus is one of such challenges. My office has been briefed by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on our nation's preparedness to prevent the occurrence of this disease here in Nigeria, as well as contingency plans to prevent escalation. The NCDC working with the Ministry of Health, the Ports Health Services, the United States Centre for Disease Control (USCDC), and the World Health Organisation (WHO) amongst others has put in place protocols for identifying, isolating and testing those who are deemed to be most at risk. And they have enhanced screening and surveillance at our nation's ports of entry. There are no direct flights from the Peoples Republic of China to Nigeria, so we do not have the option of placing an embargo on flights coming from there. However, the NCDC maintains open lines of communication with the government of the Peoples Republic of China to ensure that passengers coming from there through whatever route are identified and screened at the ports of entry. I commend the government of the Peoples Republic of China for their proactive actions to contain the spread of this disease, even as I commiserate with them on the loss of lives caused by this breakout. I ask all Nigerians and people resident in Nigeria to assist the efforts of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) by taking basic sanitary precautions. Avoid self-medication, avoid panic and report to the nearest medical facility if you or anyone you know has travelled to the affected regions within the last fourteen days.

Finally, my dear colleagues, I wish to acknowledge with the greatest gratitude the efforts of our men and women in uniform who are at this moment, taking risks and offering the supreme sacrifice to help peace take hold in troubled places all across our dear country. They are the best of us, to whom we owe not only our gratitude but also our continued dedication to the offices we hold. We must through our efforts in improving the lives of our people, make ourselves worthy of the sacrifices that these men and women have made and continue to make on our behalf.

I thank you all once more. I welcome you all back to the House of Representatives and I wish all of us a successful year of measurable achievement as we work together to achieve the joint task of nation-building.

God bless you all. God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.