

**ADDRESS BY THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, REP. FEMI GBAJABIAMILA AT THE EMERGENCY SESSION OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES TO REVIEW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA'S RESPONSE TO THE NOVEL COVID – 19 PANDEMIC AND FOR RELATED MATTERS. TUESDAY, 28<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2020.**

**PROTOCOLS**

1. Good morning Honourable colleagues. I welcome you all to this special session of the House of Representatives, and I thank you all for being here today.

2. We have convened here in unusual circumstances in keeping with these extraordinary times. We are a nation at war battling an unseen enemy; besotted on all sides, we fight on, unbroken and unbowed. Honourable Members, the arrival of the deadly coronavirus on our shores threatens the same consequences as if we were besieged by the terror of armed conflict. Though our struggle is not against bullets and bombs, our conditions are not any less dire. We are determined to survive through these trying times, and our resolve to triumph in this immediate cause is absolute.

**3.** In the one month since we last sat in session, the coronavirus has infected over a thousand of our fellow countrymen, forty of whom have passed on. Our hearts are heavy with the burden of loss. The House of Representatives extends sincere condolences to the families who have lost loved ones. We pray for the peaceful repose of the dearly departed and wish the bereaved families the fortitude to bear the loss.

**4.** The necessary precautions we must take to prevent further spread of this disease means that the bereaved cannot mourn the dead in the manner of our traditions, thus compounding the heartache. I pray to God almighty that this too shall pass, and we will in due time remember the fallen and celebrate their lives as is befitting.

**5.** The government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has thus far responded to the present challenges with equanimity. The House applauds His Excellency, President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR for appointing a Presidential Taskforce on Covid -19 composed of some of the best and brightest of our nation.

**6.** The members of the Taskforce have risen to the assignment and proven themselves worthy. We thank them, we encourage them to remain committed and to act always in the best interest of the Nigerian people. We especially recognise the Director-General of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu, whose calm and steady presence has been a comforting constant. We also recognise the chairman of the Taskforce, Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Boss Mustapha who worked to ensure that the Taskforce remains committed to its mandate, in the service of the Nigerian people.

**7.** The restrictions imposed on our people as a result of the lockdown of Lagos and Ogun States, the Federal Capital Territory and the curfews imposed by other State Governments are a necessary intervention. These restrictions are a marked departure from the norm, and many of our people are understandably having a hard time adjusting.

**8.** Honourable colleagues, as leaders in your constituencies, you must ensure that the people in your local communities understand the

reasons for these restrictions, and adhere to all preventative measures such as handwashing, social distancing and other guidelines set out by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

**9.** Our best hope is to prevent the massive outbreak of this disease in Nigeria. If we fail to do that, and this disease begins to transmit at scale, all our worst nightmares will become manifest at once, and our misfortunes will compound beyond our ability to respond. We will be left to seek our recover, with limited resources in a long and brutal process from which we cannot emerge unscathed. We must keep in mind this unfortunate truth and act accordingly.

**10.** Many have postulated that our current approach to managing the pandemic will not yield the results we desire. It has been suggested that we should look at other alternatives in dealing with this virus; alternatives that are more suited to our economic structure and cultural makeup and are custom made to our way of life. Recommendations have also been made to the effect that we should lift the lockdown, open up the economy with restrictions, including the compulsory wearing of masks in public places. We will consider all

of these recommendations and more. Whichever way we go, the total defeat of this virus must be our immediate goal and our highest priority.

**11.** The commendable palliative schemes initiated by the administration have helped alleviate the sufferings of some of our most vulnerable populations. However, many of our people have not benefited from any of the implemented measures. It is necessary that we act to ensure that as many people as need help, are reached. We must also ensure that the distribution of interventions across the country is inclusive and equitable.

**12.** At times like this, there is a tendency for the existing faultlines of a nation to become dangerously exacerbated. The government must not be complicit, by acts of omission or commission in any such aggravations, as such will only make it more difficult to maintain the unity of purpose, that is essential to our nation's survival at this delicate time.

**13.** Let me also at this time call on the administration to take advantage of the unique insights of federal legislators in targeting

the distribution of some essential palliatives. When federal government interventions do not reach those that need, we are the first to receive complaints and have to explain to our constituents the reasons why they do not qualify or why they have been left out.

**14.** Our grassroots interactions provide knowledge and context that can be useful to ensure that the hardest hit communities receive help. We intend to bring these unique perspectives in our ongoing work to codify the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) into a Bill that will be considered by the House at our next adjourned date. We will also at that time seek to pass a second Economic Stimulus Bill to provide necessary relief to individuals and corporate organisations in Nigeria. We expect that before then, the Senate will quickly consider and pass the first Economic Stimulus Bill which has since passed in the House and now awaits concurrence by the Senate.

**15.** Ladies and gentlemen, the shutdown of commercial activities initiated here at home and abroad, to curb community transmission of Covid-19 has devastated the global economy. We

have already begun to see the effect in millions of lost jobs, lost incomes, lost revenue and severely diminished productivity. In the past week, we saw oil prices fall into negative value. Our country, heavily dependent on crude oil income, has seen a drop in our revenue so severe that we risk failing to meet even the most basic obligations of governance.

**16.** At a time when the social welfare demands on the public purse are higher than they have ever been, our present reality calls for nothing short of a wholesale reform of our governing structures, systems and processes. Any such efforts must of necessity, begin with drastic reductions in the cost of governance coupled with determined efforts to drive economic diversity and innovation in the non-oil sector.

**17.** It is in preparing for this new reality that I have established a Covid-19 Strategic Response Team (CRST) with a broad mandate to develop interventions and reforms and also to update the Legislative Agenda to reflect our post-Covid realities and priorities. The Strategic Response Team will be supported by a group of technical experts,

private sector leaders and representatives. Their experience and expertise will ensure that the policy proposals presented to the House are rigorously grounded in a fact-based reality.

**18.** There are no longer any sacred cows, protected spaces or classes. Every area of our national health policy, economic policy, tax policy, education policy and security architecture are now on the table for reform. We must turn this moment of profound crises into an opportunity to make the hard choices we have too long deferred but can now no longer avoid if we are to survive as a nation. This House of Representatives is ready, and I trust that we will find allies in government and across our country who are prepared to make the changes that our country needs to survive, recover and thrive.

**19.** As we contend with the challenges of this pandemic and an economy in decline, we must not lose sight of the plight of our citizens in foreign lands who suffer stigma, harassment and abuse at the hands of their hosts. A few weeks ago, the House intervened in the matter of Nigerian nationals in dire circumstances in China.



**20.** The Minister of Foreign Affairs, His Excellency Geoffrey Onyeama has been consistent in his defence of the rights of Nigerians abroad, and the House commends his efforts. Yet, despite his efforts and the assurances given to the House by the Chinese Ambassador in Nigeria, there are still reports of ongoing mistreatment of Nigerians in China.

**21.** I call once more on the government of the Peoples Republic of China to ensure that Nigerians and people of African descent resident in China receive the human right protections to which all citizens of the world are entitled. These are the same rights and privileges the people of China receive in foreign lands, including here in Nigeria. Where there are credible cases of discrimination, harassment or rights abuses against our citizens, swift and visible action must be taken by the Chinese authorities to safeguard lives, livelihoods, property and the sense of human dignity of Nigerians and fellow Africans.

**22.** Extra-judicial punishments including unlawful evictions or detention of persons of colour under the guise of “quarantine”, are not acceptable. Any abuse of human rights or departures from the

strictures of international law betrays our shared humanity and calls for the most stringent and globally coordinated response if it persists.

**23.** Here at home, we are immensely proud of our fellow citizens, who have in the last month shown kindness and empathy beyond anything anybody could have imagined. All over this great land, without being asked, people have extended assistance to friends, family and strangers alike, in ways big and small. The private sector-led Coalition Against Covid-19 (CACOVID) has raised enormous sums to assist the efforts of the federal government and state governments in providing healthcare access, food supplies and other palliatives

**24.** Citizens have committed substantial personal resources to provide cash grants, food and medicines. As a nation, we have set aside mundane considerations and shown that our capacity for brotherhood may well be limitless. It is this, more than anything else the assures me that we will overcome our current challenges and emerge stronger and better than we ever were.

**25.** I salute all of you Honourable colleagues for your contributions to the welfare and wellbeing of your constituents in this challenging

time. The reports thus far received of your individual efforts have been laudable, and I thank you on behalf of all the Nigerian people.

**26.** As we deliberate today, let our utterances be guided principally by the desire to bring forth ideas that will improve our nation's ability to rise to the challenge of the times. Let us speak with the recognition that this is no time for politics or the consideration of minor things. This is a time for selfless service, for courage and determination to make the critical decisions necessary to survive this pandemic and shape a better future.

**27.** Honourable colleagues, none of us expected that our tenure of service would include these extraordinary times. We did not foresee the challenges we now face and must overcome, but we know that this is a time for statesmen who are willing to do what is hard and make the difficult choices from which greatness is born. I call on this Honourable House, to with one accord, boldly act in whatever ways we must to protect our people from the immediate ravages of hunger, disease death and economic devastation. Let us see to it that when the verdict of posterity is delivered, it will be kind to us.

**28.** In reconvening the House today, we have sought the guidance of health professionals and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The legislative role in a democracy is essential, and we do not have the option of sitting on the side-lines, particularly at this critical time. We have taken adequate steps to make sure we comply with the guidelines and protocol as put in place by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). This present crisis brings to the fore, the need to update our rules and practices in the National Assembly to allow for more effective use of technological tools that aid remote working. In the interim, Committees of the House should continue with relevant and practicable oversight work while observing strict guidelines.

**29.** I thank you all once more for being here today, I welcome you back to the chamber, and I pray for God's mercy and wisdom to guide us through these times.

**30.** God bless you all, and God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.