

**ADDRESS TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, BY THE SPEAKER, REP. FEMI GBAJABIAMILA ON RESUMPTION OF PLENARY FOLLOWING THE ANNUAL RECESS ON TUESDAY 29TH SEPTEMBER 2020**

I thank God by whose mercy and forbearance we are able to gather here once more in the hallowed chamber of the House of Representatives to attend to the business of the people with the dedication and determination that is expected of us, and which this moment in our history demands.

In the time we have been away from plenary, the Committees of the House have been engaging with stakeholders to achieve progress on several priority initiatives. Members have been meeting to work out strategies and develop plans for legislative action to address the many challenges of governance that we continue to face in the country.

Over this past weekend, the leadership of the House of Representatives with Vice President, Professor Yemi Osinbajo and other senior members of the executive arm of government acted to prevent the planned strike action by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). This intervention was necessary to forestall the possibility of an industrial action that disrupts the lives of Nigerians and further weakens an already troubled economy.

In the course of these negotiations, the Federal Government made commitments to labour and the Nigerian people. These commitments must be adhered to as a matter of good conscience, and to the extent that doing so does not cause us to deviate from ongoing efforts to achieve essential and long-overdue reforms to our economy. Reforms of the oil and gas sector and the

electricity and power sector that keep the heavy hand of government from undermining the proper operation of free markets must be encouraged.

We recognise that some of these reforms will increase the living costs for many at a time when people are struggling to cover the costs of daily life. We will work with the Executive to develop and implement measures to support people that need help and ensure that the most vulnerable among us can get through this interregnum with dignity. Even more importantly, the House will exercise our oversight authority to hold people's feet to the fire and deliver outcomes that are worthy of the sacrifices we are asking of the Nigerian people.

I am also pleased to announce that for the first time in our history, the House of Representatives will sit in an entirely digitised chamber where the proceedings of the House, including records of votes, will be taken appropriately in real-time and archived for all history. When we resumed in the 9th House, we promised to deliver and operate a modern parliament in keeping with international best practice. We have kept our word in this regard and will continue to do so in every other sphere.

Since March, when the virus first entered our shores, the House of Representatives has taken active measures to protect the people who work here and our constituents who visit the National Assembly Complex. As a result of these measures, we have not operated at full capacity for most of the year. Despite these limitations, the House has considered and passed 38 bills with another 159 bills awaiting reports from the Committees.

However, we still have 713 (Seven Hundred and Thirteen) bills pending second reading. We must act quickly to dispense of them lest we find ourselves overwhelmed and unable to respond to emerging developments with the speed and effectiveness that the moment requires.

Before the recess, we presented to the Nigerian people the updated Legislative Agenda of the House, which we tagged “Our Contract with Nigerians.” The updated Legislative Agenda of the House and the accompanying Implementation Framework are a significant and thorough effort to outline a set of priority actions that taken together will help us achieve a more peaceful and more prosperous nation.

We updated our Agenda to help us respond more effectively to the unique and far-reaching effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on our economy, on our national security and the general wellbeing of all our people. We must each always remember that this document is a contract with the people who sent us here and as such, our readiness and determination to keep our end of this bargain must never be in doubt.

The time has now come for us to make good on our obligations. To do that within the time frame we have committed to in the Implementation Framework, requires that we change the way we operate. From now on, motions and proposed bills that speak to the priorities set out in the Legislative Agenda will receive precedence in the House. The only exceptions will be for emergencies and matters of urgent national importance that require immediate action.

Honourable colleagues, I enjoin you to continue, as a matter of course, to acquaint yourselves with the provisions of the Legislative Agenda and the Implementation Framework, as these are documents to which we will often return during our time here.

To ensure fidelity to the commitments we have freely made, I am appointing an Adhoc Committee to guide implementation of the Legislative Agenda across the Committees and other institutions of the House of Representatives. This AdHoc Committee will work with the Committee on Rules and Business to ensure that bills brought forward for consideration align with our Agenda. Additionally, the Committee will monitor and provide regular reports on our individual and collective efforts to deliver on the objectives set out in the Agenda. Hon. Henry Nwawuba has worked closely with me to conceptualise and develop the Legislative Agenda, and Implementation Framework will serve as Chairman of the Committee. Other members will be announced subsequently.

Early in the life of the 9th House of Representatives, we promised that we would return to a regular budget cycle, running from January through to December. We kept that promise in our first year and set a standard from which we must not deviate. However, there is an ongoing problem of Ministries, Departments and Agencies of government failing to implement projects and programmes for which funds have been provided in the Budget.

It bears restating that the Appropriation Act is not merely a policy document or a statement of intent. It is the law of the land that binds us all. Any expenditure of public funds outside of the Appropriation Act is a crime, as is a failure to implement programmes and projects for which funds have been allocated and

provided. But more than that, it is a betrayal of the public trust that undermines faith in the government and frustrates good faith efforts at national development. The House will take action against those who fail in their responsibilities in this regard. I sincerely hope it doesn't come to that.

All over the world, Nigerian citizens are pursuing education and economic opportunities to better themselves and improve the circumstances of their lives. Unfortunately, in some of these places, our citizens become victims of state actions that impede on their right to life, to free movement and free enterprise. So far, the 9th House of Representatives has had cause to intervene on behalf of Nigerians in South Africa, Egypt, China and Ghana. These interventions have resulted in specific and general improvements to the wellbeing of our citizens in these countries.

This pattern of legislative diplomacy will continue. Our responsibility as Representatives to advocate for and protect the interests of our people does not terminate when they travel to other parts of the world. There is no jurisdictional limit on our duty to intervene to ensure the wellbeing of Nigerian citizens. The constitution of our Republic, to which we swear allegiance, demands this of us when it declares without exception, that "the security of the people shall be the primary purpose of government".

Last month I led a delegation of the House of Representatives to the Republic of Ghana in response to increased friction between both of our countries to the detriment of ordinary citizens on both sides who only wished to live quiet, productive lives.

The delegation met with Nigerians in Ghana to understand the challenges they faced in that country, particularly regarding the obligations imposed on them by the Ghana Investment Promotion Act. We also met with the Speaker of the Parliament, the Honourable Aaron Mike Oquaye and the President of the Republic of Ghana, His Excellency Nana Akufo-Addo to discuss our concerns and seek solutions that serve the collective best interests of all our people.

We received assurances from President Nana Akufo-Addo that Nigerians in Ghana will not be the victims of any punitive actions by state and non-state actors. We also resolved with the Parliament of Ghana to appoint a Joint Committee of members of both Legislatures to explore reciprocal legislation that will ensure the people of both countries can continue to freely trade with each other and in each other's territories.

The people of both countries have traded with each other and in each other's territories since before either nation existed in their current form. The relationship precedes all of us here and will survive us. We must ensure that the relationship we bequeath to the next generation is stronger than the one we inherited.

Ladies and gentlemen, legislative diplomacy is not only about actions to protect the rights of Nigerians abroad. On many of the issues that most affect our lives; national security, trade, healthcare and our economy, cooperation with the rest of the world is necessary to promote Nigerian interests. Legislative diplomacy is also about building alliances that allow us to meet the obligations we owe to Nigerians here at home.

One of the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic is that we are more connected to each other than we realise, and developments in one part of the world can very quickly affect the rest of the world for good or for ill.

Unfortunately, some have learned the wrong lessons from our recent experiences, and are choosing the course of isolationist nationalism. I believe that this moment calls for the opposite. This is a time for reaching out, for cooperation and partnership, for brotherhood and the recognition of our shared humanity.

I believe, and my colleagues in Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa and Senegal agree with me that our separate national interests do not preclude us from a joint endeavour in the common good. It is in that spirit that we have convened the Conference of Speakers and Heads of African Parliament (CoSAP) to collectively engage on issues that affect all of us, particularly the enormous and increasingly untenable debt burden on the continent.

My colleague Speakers and Heads of Parliament have asked that I chair this Conference. I thank them for the honour and their faith in me.

We have established a Secretariat here in the House of Representatives, and a Technical Working Group (TWG) of policy aides from across the participating countries to support the Conference as we chart a new course for Africa in the world. Honourable Colleagues, I ask the blessing and support of this House to continue in this effort.

Two weeks ago, His Excellency, President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR signed the Police Reform Act into law. The Act is the first significant reform effort in a generation. It is the beginning and not the end of such measures. The Nigeria Police Force, as it currently operates, has too long and too often failed to meet the expectations of the Nigerian people.

In many parts of our country, people are more afraid of encounters with the police than they are of criminals. That's not right, and we can no longer stand for it. There will be, in this 9th House of Representatives, further legislation to improve police performance across the board and to introduce mechanisms for individual and collective accountability in the Nigeria Police Force. Our objective is nothing short of a total overhaul of the culture and practice of policing in Nigeria.

In the same vein, we have begun, and we will expedite work on the Armed Forces Trust Fund Bill so that in the shortest possible time, we can finalise and pass legislation that ensures once and for all that the resources we need to protect the homeland are never at the mercy of politics or changes in policy or personnel.

The House has received and will shortly begin consideration of the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB) as part of our efforts to achieve wholesale reform of the oil and gas sector in Nigeria. This is not the first time that we have initiated the Petroleum Industry Bill or similar efforts at broad oil and gas sector reform in the National Assembly. I assure all Nigerians that we in the 9th House of Representatives fully intend to succeed this time around.

However, I must appeal to stakeholders in the public and private sector, to the media, to the host communities and all who wish our country well to support this process. Let us reject cynicism and resist all attempts to frustrate this reform effort in service of the narrow interests of any particular group. Let us put Nigeria first so that history may judge us kindly.

Honourable Colleagues, I have said before that the success or failure of the 9th House of Representatives would not be the result of the actions of any one individual. We are in this together. Let us continue to work in unity, as we have done thus far. Let us continue to act always in the best interests of our people, never allowing our disagreements over politics to get in the way of our joint efforts at nation-building. As we ask for God's favour on our endeavours, let us make sure that the decisions we make, the actions we take, and the priorities we pursue are always deserving.

I welcome you all once more to the chamber, and I thank you for your time this morning.

God bless you all, and God bless our Federal Republic of Nigeria.