

REMARKS BY THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, REP. FEMI GBAJABIAMILA  
AT THE RESUMPTION OF PLENARY IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AFTER THE ANNUAL  
RECESS. TUESDAY, 20TH OCTOBER 2022

PROTOCOLS

Good morning.

1. I am delighted to welcome you back to the House of Representatives. I thank almighty God by whose grace and favour we assemble in this honourable parliament to do the people's business.
2. Our gathering today is somewhat unusual as we have convened the plenary in a different location due to the ongoing and long overdue renovation of the National Assembly Complex. The business of parliament is essential to the proper operations of democratic government. Yet, for some time now, the conditions of these premises have not reflected the importance of the work we do here.
3. Last week I inspected the ongoing projects in the complex. Contractors are currently working to ensure that the facility is fit for purpose. I have been informed that this might not be completed until the middle of next year. However, I have asked the contractors to work quickly and efficiently so members can return to the iconic green chamber and to more productive working conditions in the National Assembly.
4. Honourable Colleagues, in a few days, the campaign for the 2023 general elections will officially commence. Already, activities towards the campaign are in high gear with consultations and outreach by candidates and incumbents across the country. This is normal, and it is expected. However, those of us who hold office must endeavour to deliver on the mandate we hold for the duration of our term. So, we must strike a balance as we campaign, because we have a 4-year mandate.
5. This is especially true for us in the 9th House of Representatives because of the commitments we made in our legislative agenda. We must ensure that we try to live up to those pledges because we will be assessed on that basis whether we like it or not. During recess, I requested an assessment of the status of bills in the House. From that assessment, it became clear that many priority bills have stalled at different stages in the legislative process.
6. On the authority of Order 18(3)(g) of the House Rules, I have instructed the Committee on Rules and Business to discharge all priority bills pending in the various committees beyond the allotted time. These priority bills include legislation to implement essential reforms to our national security architecture, bills that aim to effect needed reforms of critical government institutions, as well as others that seek to improve our national ability to meet human capital development targets. That process will begin today until all such bills have been treated.

7. We have very little time left to finish the work we have been called to do in this Assembly. There is much left to do, and we cannot turn our attention to those whilst we have pending tasks to deliver. I urge all the Chairmen of the standing and ad-hoc committees to act promptly on pending bills and motions, conclude the activities of ad-hoc committees and submit their reports for consideration and subsequent action. Please take all proper and necessary measures to clear the backlog of assignments before the schedule becomes even more encumbered by budget activities and the pressures of the campaign season.

8. It has become necessary for the House to intervene in the extended faceoff between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government. This current impasse is due primarily to disagreements over conditions of service of the staff and funding of universities in general. Therefore, this afternoon, alongside the leadership of the House and the relevant committees, I will meet with representatives of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Our agenda is to explore whatever options there are for parliament to help resolve the present crises so that our children can return to school.

9. It is long established that access to education, more than anything else, is key to unlocking prosperity and improving social mobility outcomes in any society. And we all agree that government has a role in ensuring that our nation's young people get a quality education that allows them to compete and thrive in the 21st-century knowledge economy. Yet, evidence abounds that the current framework of government-sponsored tertiary education is no longer working as it should and hasn't worked for a long time. Our immediate goal is to do everything to get our children back to school. However, the time has also come to begin a candid assessment of the current system and to consider all available options for complete reform. We owe this to our children and to our nation's future.

10. While insecurity continues to be a scourge across the land, we have recently recorded significant victories against the purveyors of violence and conflict across the country. In the North East, North West, and North Central, men and women of our nation's armed forces have neutralised scores of bandits and insurgents, taken out the heads of different cells, destroyed training camps and significantly disrupted their ability to organise against the peace and security of the Nigerian people. I salute the courage and gallantry of our fighting men and women. I assure them that this House will continue to do all we can to support them and honour their sacrifice.

11. Beyond the activities of bandits and insurgents, other manifestations of violent crime continue to adversely affect the quality of life of our citizens. Many factors contribute to insecurity in our country, one of which is the explosive growth in the trade and consumption of narcotics. Available evidence suggests that the narcotics business has also been crucial to sustaining the internal security crises in the North East, North West and South East. I dare to say that there is no constituency in the country that isn't currently experiencing a surge in drug use and associated crime, the most recent was the discovery in Ikorodu, Lagos State.

12. The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) has significantly increased interdiction efforts across the country and at all ports of entry. These efforts have resulted in record-breaking seizures of banned substances at the ports and inner cities. I commend these efforts and urge the Agency to continue doing this vital work. We cannot afford to have our country overrun by the cancer of the drug trade and the devastation it brings. Therefore, all of us, both in our official and personal capacities, must become soldiers in the war on drugs.

13. We will continue to support the work of law enforcement to identify and apprehend the promoters of the trade and block their trade routes. We will consider policy interventions to ensure that the administration of justice recognises and reflects the critical distinction between victims and the kingpins who profit from the misery of the drug trade. But we must also ask ourselves what is causing so many young people to embrace the drug trade or become users themselves. How we answer that question will ultimately determine whether we will win this fight or be defeated by it.

14. We hope to receive the 2023 Appropriations Bill from the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, His Excellency Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, in the first week of October. In advance of this, the Senate and House Committees on Finance have begun interactive sessions with the ministries, departments and agencies of the government on the Medium Term Expenditure Framework and Fiscal Strategy Paper. Some concerns have emerged from these interactions, most prominently of which are the issues of the scope of deficit financing to be proposed in the new budget and the decline in crude oil production due to theft and sabotage.

15. While the House appreciates that our current fiscal conditions necessitate borrowing to finance budgetary expenditures, we are, nonetheless, concerned about the long-term impact of this burden on the country and our ability to pay what we owe in a responsible and sustainable way. These questions will be central to our consideration of the 2023 Appropriation Bill when presented. We will also be mindful of the provisions of our laws, especially the Fiscal Responsibility Act, as it relates to the scope of deficit financing of the budget. Ministries, departments and agencies of the government should take note that appropriations for new projects will be influenced by the extent to which existing projects have been funded and their performance in executing these projects as intended.

16. Due to theft and various acts of economic sabotage, we are experiencing a massive decline in the volume of crude oil exports. Our crude oil export of 972,394 bpd for August is the lowest we have recorded in the last two decades. At a time when we are already experiencing severe financial constraints, the perpetrators of this brazen heist threaten our ability to serve the Nigerian people and meet the demands of governance and nation-building. Their actions constitute treason against our country, for which they must be held accountable.

17. There are mechanisms in place to prevent these sorts of bad actors, and the government spends significant amounts of money each year to protect oil and gas resources in the country. Evidently, these existing arrangements do not suffice. As such, there is an urgent need to review them and make the necessary improvements. It is also of particular

importance that the perpetrators of these crimes against the state are identified, prosecuted and subjected to the stiffest penalties the law allows. Those who seek to impoverish our country in this manner have declared war against the Nigerian people. They are no different from the insurgents and terrorists against whom we are battling in various theatres. The government's response must be sufficient to convince them of the error of their ways and deter others who might be tempted to join in their treason. I met with the Finance Minister and the DG Budget and made it clear to them that enough of crude oil theft. Nigerians don't want to hear that again. What do you intend to do about it? That's the important question.

18. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria begins with the words 'we the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, having firmly and solemnly resolved'. In this 9th Assembly, we pledged to effect changes to the constitution that will give full effect to our people's aspirations and help achieve our nation's highest ideals. We promised a constitution that reflects the future we desire and the potential we aspire to rather than the past from which we emerged. To that end, we considered and passed substantive amendments, which we forwarded to the state legislatures as required by the constitution.

19. Much of what we hope to become as a nation will remain elusive until we have a genuinely democratic constitution. We need a constitution that addresses once and for all the unsettled questions that continue to divide us, distract from nation-building and hinder our hopes for a more perfect union. Therefore, I appeal to our colleagues in the state parliaments and to all the relevant authorities in the states to expedite action on these constitutional amendment bills under the leadership of the Deputy Speaker. We owe it to the Nigerian people to deliver a constitution that speaks to our future and, most importantly, comes from and belongs to 'we the people'.

20. Honourable colleagues, we will not be here for much longer as the end of our term draws near. In the time we have left, each new day presents a valuable opportunity to do the best we can to make our country a place of peace and prosperity, justice and freedom for all. So, in the words of Saint Teresa of Calcutta, 'Yesterday is gone; tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today, so let us begin'.

21. I welcome you back to the House of Representatives, and thank you for being here this morning. God bless you all, and may God bless our Federal Republic of Nigeria.