

**REMARKS BY THE RT. HON. ABBAS TAJUDEEN, PH.D, SPEAKER, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, ON THE RESUMPTION OF PLENARY AFTER EASTER AND SALLAH SHORT BREAK ON TUESDAY, 30<sup>TH</sup> APRIL, 2024 IN THE RENOVATED CHAMBERS OF THE HOUSE AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY COMPLEX:**

Honourable Colleagues,

I am excited and proud to welcome you all back to this hallowed permanent chamber, which, after two years of renovation, stands renewed and transformed. As we gather in this transformed and modernised chamber, let us take a moment to marvel at the ingenuity and dedication that has culminated in this grand achievement.

2. First, I extend my deepest thanks to the Federal Government, whose unwavering commitment and substantial investment made this renovation possible. I also wish to express our collective appreciation to the architects, engineers, construction workers, and all personnel involved in this extensive project. Their hard work and persistence have ensured that our chamber is not only aesthetically pleasing but also equipped with state-of-the-art facilities that befit the dignity of this institution.

3. This modernisation includes advanced technological systems to enhance legislative activities and improved acoustic and seating arrangements to facilitate more effective debates and discussions. As we adapt to these new enhancements, I urge each member to fully utilise these facilities to improve our service delivery to the nation. It is our responsibility to make the fullest and best use of this space by re-dedicating ourselves to legislation that prioritises the welfare and well-being of our people and our nation. As the maxim goes, "To whom much is given, much is expected!".

4. Honourable Colleagues, let us pause to mourn the loss and celebrate the legacy of Hon. Sidi Ali, a Second Republic lawmaker and veteran Journalist, who died in Kano on 26th April, 2024 and Sen. Ayogu Eze, who passed away on 26th April, 2024, having served in the 6th and 7th Assemblies. Both men dedicated their lives to the service of our nation, advocating passionately for the welfare of our citizens and the betterment of our society. Their unwavering commitment to democratic values and significant contributions to legislative proceedings have undoubtedly contributed to institution-building and democratic strengthening in Nigeria. The House also commiserates with our colleagues, who lost loved ones during the holidays including:

- i. Hon. Kaikaku Hassan Jakduwa (representing Bade/Jakusko Federal Constituency of Yobe State) who lost his wife on 21st April, 2024.
- ii. Hon. Stanley Olajide (Representing Ibadan North West/South West Federal Constituency, Oyo State), who lost his father on 12th April, 2024
- iii. Hon. Alex Egbona (Yakurr/Abi constituency, Cross River State), who lost his mother on 7th February and was buried on 27th April, 2024.

May God Almighty forgive their shortcomings and grant them paradise. We also pray for our colleagues and their families that God will comfort them.

5. Today, we resume plenary sessions following a brief recess for the Easter and Eid ul Fitr celebrations. These holy periods remind us of the central role that faith plays in our lives and the fabric of Nigerian society. They teach us about sacrifice, redemption, and renewal, principles guiding our actions as citizens and leaders. As we represent diverse faiths and cultures, let us remember that our diversity is not a division but our greatest strength. It enhances our collective wisdom and enriches our perspectives, which is essential in crafting legislation that benefits all Nigerians. I have no doubt that the recess has allowed us to rest and reconnect with our families and constituents.

6. As we resume plenary sessions today, it is imperative that we reflect on some of the critical developments that coincided with our recess. Firstly, we acknowledge with profound gratitude the recent feats recorded by our security forces in some parts of the country, most especially in Borno and Katsina States, where many terrorists and bandits were neutralised and weapons recovered. I wish to express our profound gratitude and unwavering support to the brave men and women of our armed forces. Day and night, these courageous officers battle against the tides of insecurity and the scourge of terrorism that threatens the peace of our nation. The House will continue to support their efforts and ensure that the lives and livelihoods of all Nigerians are protected from any internal and external threats.

7. Despite significant progress in improving security, recent happenings remind us of the task ahead. The gruesome and dastardly murder of military personnel in Okuama in Delta State highlights the risks faced by those who continuously put their lives on the line for our defence and security. While condemning the killings, the House commiserates with the families of the fallen heroes. We urge security agencies to leave no stone unturned to bring the perpetrators to justice. Similarly, we urge everyone involved to exercise restraint and allow the law of the land to take its course. I wish to specifically commend President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, GCFR, for personally leading the funeral of the gallant patriots and awarding posthumous national honours to all seventeen of them. His gesture of scholarships and houses to the families of the slain military personnel is equally highly laudable.

8. Honourable colleagues, we are painfully aware of the harrowing attacks that have specifically targeted our schools, where innocent children, especially girls, are abducted. Schools, which should be sanctuaries of learning and safety, have become targets for terrorists and kidnappers. These acts are not only heinous but are direct attacks on the future of Nigeria and rob children of their right to education and secure childhood. The implications of these assaults stretch far beyond the immediate pain and disruption they cause. They sow fear in communities, discourage school attendance, and potentially stifle the education of a generation. We must not allow the ambitions of our children to be thwarted by fear.

9. The House stands united with our armed forces and will advocate for comprehensive strategies to safeguard our schools. This involves not only physical security measures such as fencing, security personnel, and surveillance technologies but also community-based strategies that involve local leaders in our security framework. On our part, we will continue

to ensure that our security agencies have the necessary tools and legislation to act effectively. To this end, we recommend the establishment of a dedicated fund specifically for school safety. This fund will support the implementation of advanced security measures and training of security personnel and communities on strategies for protecting educational environments. Mindful of the financial requirements, this model can be piloted in a few schools, especially those that are most vulnerable to such attacks.

10. You may recall that this House expedited the passage of legislation that enhances coordination between different security agencies. We will work with the Senate to ensure speedy consideration and onward transmission to the President for his assent. When finalised, the law will establish a clear framework for intelligence sharing and response coordination, which can significantly improve our preventive capabilities. The House supports President Tinubu's drive to establish a regional counter-terrorism centre for intelligence sharing, operational coordination, and capacity building throughout Africa.

11. Honourable Colleagues, the House will continuously dialogue with the security sector to identify legislative gaps hindering operational effectiveness. By understanding their needs directly, we can craft laws that empower rather than encumber. It is in this regard that we convened the first National Dialogue on State Policing. Various high-level stakeholders, including two former presidents, emphasised the need to review our policing structure to respond better to emerging threats, especially at the community level. The recommendations from the conversation have been forwarded to the Committee on Constitutional Alteration for further legislative action. Additionally, I have constituted the Steering Committee for the Legislative Security Summit with Members drawn from all the security-based committees of the House. The Summit is scheduled to hold in the third quarter of the year and represents our commitment to continuous engagement with security sector actors and citizens.

12. Dear colleagues, the dialogue equally highlighted the increasing nexus between insecurity and crime, particularly regarding illegal mining and the theft of our mineral resources. The theft of minerals undermines our economy, reducing the funds available for public services, infrastructure, and welfare programs that could uplift millions of our citizens out of poverty. Furthermore, these illegal activities damage the environment and threaten livelihoods. In line with our agenda to boost government income and diversify the economy, the House will tighten regulations around mining operations, increase penalties for violations, and improve surveillance and enforcement mechanisms.

13. Our intervention in this sector will necessarily involve closer collaboration with the Executive. As such, we recommend the establishment of a joint task force dedicated to addressing illegal mining and mineral theft. This task force will coordinate between various government agencies such as the mining police to ensure a unified and robust response to these crimes. Additionally, the House will amend and enact legislation that will deter such activities and promote a transparent and sustainable mining sector. These legislative measures will include stricter licensing processes, enhanced penalties for non-compliance, and incentives for adopting best practices in environmental conservation. By working together, we can foster an environment that encourages legitimate investors and protects local communities. Ultimately, however, improving security entails addressing its root causes,

which include poverty, inequality and social injustice. We in the House are committed to addressing these issues through law-making and oversight activities.

14. On the economic front, the government has made significant strides toward improving the economy. In the past months, the government has implemented several measures to stabilise the economy, enhance productivity, and boost investor confidence. Also, targeted actions are being taken to alleviate the inflationary effects of these reforms on the most vulnerable. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) has also taken critical steps to tighten monetary policy and refocus on its core mandate of maintaining price stability. It also hiked interest rates by 400 basis points to 22.75%, to contain inflation and ease pressure on the Naira. I commend the Governor and his team for their proactiveness and focus.

15. Going forward, however, there is a need to implement measures that strengthen the value of Naira in the long term. This includes implementing policies and initiatives focusing on value creation, multiplication and expansion. One sure, even if difficult, way of achieving this is through optimising agricultural and industrial productivity and exploring our mineral wealth, as indicated above. Revitalising rural areas and enhancing rural connectivity can increase local production and stimulate the primary market.

16. Despite the challenging economic outlook, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has applauded recent improvements in revenue collection and enhanced oil production (which reached 1.65 million barrels in January, 2024) mainly due to enhanced security in combatting theft and vandalism. Other positive measures taken by the government include the launching of the Nigeria Consumer Credit Corporation which ensures that citizens are able to afford basic items without necessarily paying out of pocket as obtainable in advanced countries of the world. The President's approval of the Consumer Credit Scheme is significant as it empowers citizens to improve their quality of life by accessing goods and services immediately and paying for them over time in a responsible manner. This scheme supports essential purchases like homes, vehicles, education, and healthcare, which are crucial for maintaining stability and achieving personal aspirations.

17. Only recently, the government commenced the implementation of temporary cash transfers to 15 million households. The release of grains, seeds and fertilisers by the government has contributed to improving food security. Although the price of food items remains high, a better harvest in the half of the year is expected to contribute to a positive economic outlook as GDP growth for 2024 is projected to reach 3.2 per cent.

18. Equally worth mentioning is the National Single Window initiative, launched by the President to modernize the country's trade processes. The initiative will streamline government trade compliance via a digital platform and connect our ports, government agencies, and major stakeholders.

19. Honourable Colleagues, you may also recall that on Wednesday, 3rd April 2024, the President also signed the revised Student Loans Repeal and Re-enactment Bill 2024. The new law creates the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) and addresses previous issues related to governance, the purpose of loans, eligibility of applicants, the application process, repayment terms, and loan recovery. The Act aims to ensure that economically disadvantaged Nigerians can access quality education and opportunities for skill development. Just two days ago, the President appointed an astute professional, Mr. Jim Ovia, CFR, as the Chairman of the Board of NELFUND. We look forward to the immediate and meticulous implementation of the scheme.

20. The House of Representatives recognises and applauds these measures, which, in the interim, can address the impact of removing fuel and electricity subsidies. However, as noted in my keynote address at the House Conference on the Power Sector, wider consultation is required as Nigeria commences the implementation of the multi-tier electricity market. Major stakeholders at the forum emphasised the need to address deeper structural challenges, such as liquidity facing the sector.

21. Honourable colleagues, it is in recognition of the crucial role of the legislature in promoting economic growth and development that the House Retreat on Economic Transformation and Development has been organised. Some of the issues to be tackled at the retreat include effective implementation of the Petroleum Industry Act, tax reforms, and modernisation. The retreat, which commences today, will be strategic in deepening the understanding and enhancing the effectiveness of the legislature in driving economic transformation, development, and comprehensive tax reforms. I call on all Members to participate fully in the deliberations and engage with the resource persons and their colleagues.

22. As we reconvene for this plenary session, I must emphasise the critical role of legislative oversight, a cornerstone of our mandate as the representatives of the Nigerian people. With the 2024 budget in the implementation phase, we must intensify our efforts to monitor and evaluate the compliance and performance of the Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). Oversight of budget implementation is not merely a procedural duty – it is a fundamental aspect of ensuring transparency and accountability in government spending. I call on all Committees to scrutinise budget allocations and expenditures to deter mismanagement and waste, thereby protecting public funds and ensuring they serve the collective good of all Nigerians.

23. Also, I wish to reiterate that our oversight duties and investigative hearings must be conducted with a heightened level of thoroughness, transparency, and effectiveness. All reports and recommendations from these activities must be promptly presented before this House in plenary for consideration and action. This is essential for improving public sector governance and service delivery. Accordingly, the Committee on Monitoring and Evaluation of House Standing and Ad-hoc Committees must ensure that all committees adhere to their terms of reference as outlined in our Standing Orders and conform to the highest standards of legislative ethics. By so doing, we can further strengthen and streamline legislative activities and exercise effective oversight over government agencies.

24. Dear Colleagues, another crucial aspect of our constitutional mandate is 'representation'. This 'People's House' has consistently prioritised direct engagement with our citizens to understand the heartbeat of our country. Through town halls, public hearings, and personal interactions, we gather invaluable feedback about the impact of our legislative activities and the aspirations of our people. However, our efforts must not stop there. I call upon each member to intensify engagement with their constituencies through more formal structures. Establishing constituency offices is not merely a routine but a fundamental component of effective representation. Those who have not yet established these offices should do so promptly to ensure ongoing, fruitful interactions with the citizens we represent. We must not forget that our legitimacy as a legislature stems from the trust and mandate bestowed upon us by the people. To further this objective, the Committee on Constituency Outreach is tasked with overseeing the establishment and operation of these offices, ensuring they serve as effective bridges between this House and the communities we serve.

25. Esteemed colleagues, June 2024 marks a significant milestone: the 25th anniversary of Nigeria's return to democracy and uninterrupted legislative governance. In celebration of this historic occasion, I am pleased to announce the inaugural House Open Week, scheduled for June 2024. This significant event marks a new chapter in our legislative process, designed to foster greater transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. House Open Week will provide an exceptional opportunity for elected representatives to engage directly with the citizens we serve, discuss their concerns, and share insights into our legislative work.

26. The benefits of this initiative are manifold. It will strengthen the bond between the National Assembly and the public, enhance mutual understanding, and promote a participatory approach to governance. By opening our doors and our processes, we aim to demystify the workings of this House, thereby empowering our citizens and enhancing their trust in our legislative institution. I urge every member to participate actively in this pioneering event. I also call on all our partners to support us in ensuring the success of this event and ensure the broad participation of Nigerians at all levels.

25. I am equally pleased to share the exciting news of the commencement of the Parliamentary Development Programme. This transformative initiative originates from a thorough capacity needs assessment conducted with the invaluable support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It embarks on a four-year journey to substantially enhance our institutional capabilities and systems. This programme, generously supported by the House and our esteemed international development partners, with the UNDP at the forefront, aims to refine our legislative procedures to align with global best practices. I strongly encourage every member and staff to engage actively in this programme. Our gratitude to all our other partners who contribute in different capacities to the success of the House, including PLAC, KAS, YIAGA Africa, UN Women, PEARL, NESG and others.

28. Honourable Colleagues, I wish to conclude by reiterating my unwavering faith in the Nigerian project and the dedicated leadership of the President. Only recently Nigerians celebrated the commencement of flight operations from Lagos to London by an indigenous airline (Air Peace). This feat wouldn't have been possible without the support and intervention

of the President and the resilience of the management of Air Peace. I am confident that under the guidance of Mr. President, our country will continue to thrive and overcome the challenges that lie ahead. The House of Representatives remains committed to being a steadfast partner in this journey, dedicated to contributing meaningfully to our nation's progress. Together, with a spirit of unity and purpose, we will work diligently to ensure that our actions and decisions as legislators uphold the aspirations of all Nigerians and steer our country towards greater prosperity and peace.

29. Thank you, and may God continue to prosper and bless our dear Federal Republic of Nigeria.