

Edo's education reforms success story reverberates at LSE Africa Summit in London

● as Obaseki dazzles global leaders, participants with impact of EdoBEST programme, others

OMI OMAGE

The Edo State Governor, Mr. Godwin Obaseki, at the weekend dazzled global and business leaders, policymakers and other partic-

ipants at the LSE Africa Summit 2024 in London, United Kingdom, with the impact of his administration's education sector reforms, reeling out how these reforms in the past seven and a half years have improved

learning outcomes, especially at the foundational level, tackling learning poverty.

The event was held with the theme "African Minds Transforming Futures: Building Resilient Education Systems".

Obaseki, who was a keynote speaker at the forum, spoke on "The Future of Education in Africa: The Role of African Players in Advancing Education in Africa".

Obaseki, while reiterating the

need to sustain investment in education to effectively harness the potential and resourcefulness of Africa's youthful population, said the continent's youths hold the key to its sustainable growth and development.

"By 2050, Africa will have at least 33 percent of the global youth population and this population holds the key to shaping our world, our culture, and pol-

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The Nigerian Observer



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...that the people may know

Nigeria's gas project promises \$18.3bn annual earnings

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Military gets plaudits after rescue of 137 Kaduna schoolchildren

● Tinubu calls for stricter security measures to safeguard schools

● Overhaul security architecture, end insecurity —Atiku, Obi

TOBORE JEROME

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu on Sunday commended the National Security Adviser, the security agencies, and the Kaduna State Government for the dispatch and diligence with which they handled the release of the Kuriga schoolchildren in Kaduna State, noting that incipient urgency, meticulous attention, and tireless dedication were critical to optimal outcomes in cases of mass abductions.

The President also stressed the significance of collaboration between the Federal Government and states for expected outcomes, especially on matters of security.

He therefore called for stricter security

measures to make schools "safe sanctuaries of learning" following the rescue of 137 abductees.

In a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Ajuri Ngelale, President Tinubu, who also

welcomed the release of pupils of a Tsangaya School in Sokoto State, assured Nigerians that his administration

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GOVERNOR'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS UNITY GAMES:

Nigerian ex-international, Nwankwo Kanu (middle); Asia State Governor, Dr. Alex Otti (2nd right); Speaker, Abia State House of Assembly, Rt. Hon. E. I. Emeruwa, and others, during the kick-off of the Governor's Secondary Schools Unity Games at the Umuahia Township Stadium, Umuahia, Abba State.

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H.E. Godwin Obaseki

INVEST IN EDO

- AGRICULTURE
- ENERGY
- POWER
- HEALTHCARE
- MINING
- INDUSTRY
- TOURISM



Nigeria's gas project promises \$18.3bn annual earnings

● **\$15bn investment required to strengthen infrastructure —Kyari**

BILL OKONEDO

Nigeria will require between \$10 billion and \$15 billion over the next three years to ramp up gas infrastructure and could earn as much as \$18.3 billion annually to the domestic economy.

The Group Executive Officer of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC), Mele Kyari, gave the estimate of investment required in gas over a three-year period at the 2024 edition of CER-AWeek, a global oil and gas event in Houston, the United States, organised by S&P Global.

The programme which ended on Friday was themed "Multi-dimensional Energy Transition: Markets, Climate, Technology and Geopolitics".

Leading international consulting firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), estimates that harnessing Nigeria's proven gas reserves can stimulate an estimated Gross Value Added (GVA) of US\$18.3 billion annually to the domestic economy.

PwC further says optimising the domestic utilisation of gas could support 6.5 million Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs for the local economy.

At the Houston conference, Kyari argued that the main focus of the NNPC at the moment was building capacity to deliver gas into the domestic market, reiterating that Nigeria remains a gas country with associated oil rather than the other way round.

Nigeria has over 208 Trillion Cubic Feet (TCF) of proven gas reserves and about 600 TCF

in potential reserves, but can hardly get the resource out of the ground due to lack of infrastructure and the much-needed investment in the sector.

The price of cooking gas has been rising steadily over the months in the country and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) says the average price of 5kg of cooking gas increased from N5,139.25 recorded in January 2024 to N6,154.50 in February 2024.

The demand for cooking gas in Nigeria has seen a dramatic increase after it was discovered that it can be used not only for cooking but for powering generators.

Factors influencing the upward trend in the price of cooking gas in the local market include inadequate investments in

natural gas exploration within the country and a significant reduction in the production of associated gas, which is derived from crude oil exploration, due to rampant crude oil theft.

Kyari said the country takes the issue of energy availability very seriously and seeks the cheapest route to explore it.

He observed that there is now a clear opportunity that gas has, which wasn't there 10 years ago, explaining that the NNPC and its partners were building a number of trunk lines that would supply gas within the network.

He said within the next three to four years, there would likely be in-country gas infrastructure to raise supply, especially domestically.

"What we see is that we will

probably need between \$10 billion to \$15 billion in two to three years. That should cover the immediate gap. And of course, looking beyond providing gas in the domestic market, which is to see how relationships and partnerships can create gas for export," Kyari said.

"When you look at that and then probably you see another incremental \$10 billion to \$12 billion which will create the opportunity for growth," he said.

The NNPC chief said there was promise in an ongoing

engagement, which had reached a very advanced stage, to create a pipeline that could pass through 13 African countries into Morocco and then to Europe, estimated at \$25 billion.

He mentioned the ongoing construction of the NLNG Train 7, expressing the hope that it would likely double Nigeria's current capacity in the liquefied natural gas space when completed, and called for support from other countries in sub-Saharan Africa to close the energy availability gap.

Nigeria's gas project promises...

«CONTINUED FROM PG 1

itics, among others. This gives us immense opportunity to reshape the world. However, a bulk of this population could become a liability if we do not invest in them," the governor said.

"So, on one hand, we have this asset that holds the key to Africa's future and development, and on the other hand is the challenges. I believe that if we have the political will and make strategic investments, build a resilient and dynamic education system, prioritize skills development to address global challenges, and encourage innovation and inclusive governance, we stand a very good chance of resolving and tackling these challenges," he said.

While identifying obstacles to improving education and youth development in the continent, the governor listed poor infrastructure, lack of teacher training, poverty level and digital divide in accessing necessary technology for education as major obstacles.

"So if we must build a resilient education system in the region, we must understand that education should not just be seen as constructing buildings and classrooms. It is more about igniting curiosity, fostering critical thinking, and empowering young minds to reach their full potential. We must focus on nurturing the flames of knowledge and inspiration transcending mere bricks and mortar," he said.

Sharing success stories of the state's education sector reforms, Obaseki noted, "We had a unique experience when we came on board. We had a huge challenge in terms of education. Edo State at the time was a prime source for human trafficking and illegal migration. Between 2016 and 2017, we had more than 30,000 young Edo boys and girls who had got themselves to Libya to cross over to Europe.

"Our children were significantly underperforming academically; teachers needed more encouragement, support and modern tools and techniques; schools were not properly managed and there was no

community ownership of basic education. At the time, the government lacked real-time concrete data for policy making and interventions.

"We knew we needed to create and strengthen our education ecosystem focusing on foundational learning, on the basis of access, inclusion, and quality control.

"We focused on system strengthening and organizational development, making the institutions stronger to drive these reforms. We also knew that the key to education is teaching. So, we prioritized teachers' professional development and quality assurance. We also concentrated on curriculum development and learning outcomes as well as community engagement and partnerships, while paying critical attention to school infrastructure and facilities."

The Governor noted that these efforts and reforms over the past seven and half years have repositioned the State among the top five education accelerator sub-nationals in Africa with radical changes that have positively transformed the education ecosystem.

According to organisers of the LSE Africa Summit, "As Governor, Mr. Obaseki is at the forefront of re-enacting Governance in Nigeria and a strong proponent for the use of technology in Government to deliver efficient services to the people. Today, he leads the only State in Nigeria that has fully adopted e-Governance, ensuring that Government correspondences are paperless.

"His innovative policies/programs include the Edo Basic Education Sector Transformation 'EdoBEST', tackling learning poverty through technology, and utilizing public-private partnerships to enhance investment, promote industrialization, and stimulate economic growth in the State.

"He spearheaded the Edo State Oil Palm Programme, positioning Edo as frontrunners in oil palm production in Africa. Additionally, Mr. Obaseki created The Victor Uwaifo Creative Hub, a state-of-the-art facility supporting film and music production to boost opportunities within the creative industry."



PALM SUNDAY:

Imo State Governor, Hope Uzodimma; his wife, Chioma, and other government officials on procession, during the Palm Sunday celebration at Government House, Owerri.

Military gets plaudits after rescue of 137 Kaduna...

«CONTINUED FROM PG 1

was deploying detailed strategies to ensure that schools remain "safe sanctuaries of learning, not lairs for wanton abductions".

This came as the Nigerian Defence Headquarters (DHQ) disclosed that the 137 schoolchildren who were kidnapped from LEA School Kuriga in Chikun Local Government of Kaduna State have been rescued from their abductors.

The presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP) in the 2023 election, Peter Obi, and his People's Democratic Party (PDP) counterpart, Atiku Abubakar, also praised the military for the release of the schoolchildren.

Obi said the news of the children's release was comforting, even as he asked the Federal Government to ensure that every Nigerian still held by kidnappers is also released.

"It is comforting to hear that 287 school children abducted in

Kaduna have been released. It is hard to imagine the mental pain and trauma the children must have gone through in the hands of their abductors," Obi said.

"Efforts should also be made, not just to release many of our people in the different kidnappers' dens across the country, but to end the scourge of insecurity completely.

"I encourage every Nigerian, in the midst of these dark and fearful nights in our nation where danger seems to be lurking on every corner, to remain hopeful for the new dawn of a secure and safe nation – the New Nigeria which is possible," he said.

Atiku, on his part, called for the overhaul of the nation's security architecture amid the several security threats confronting the nation.

He also called for the "strengthening of the Safe School Initiative that prioritises the protection of schools, especially in the areas that are

most vulnerable to mass kidnapping of school children".

"But above all, there should be an overhaul of the security architecture to meet the demands of the threats facing us," Atiku said.

In a statement released on Sunday by the Director of Defence Media Operations, Major General Edward Buba, the military said it would continue to make efforts until hostages from other abduction attacks have been secured and the perpetrators of terrorism arrested.

Giving details of the rescue operation, the military said, "In the early hours of 24 March 2024, the military working with local authorities and government agencies across the country, in a coordinated search and rescue operation rescued the hostages. The hostages are the same persons that were abducted from the school at Kuriga in Chikun LGA of Kaduna State.

"The rescued hostages totaling 137 comprise 76 females

and 61 males. They were rescued in Zamfara State and would be conveyed and handed over to the Kaduna State Government for further action.

"Relatedly, it would be recalled that on 21 March 2024, troops equally rescued 16 pupils (Almajiris) with a woman taken hostage in Gada LGA of Sokoto State. These hostages were handed over to the Sokoto State Government. These efforts demonstrate the armed forces resolve to find other innocent hostages and track down the terrorists that perpetrated these crimes.

"These efforts would continue until other hostages are found and the terrorists arrested, tried, and brought to justice by Nigerian law."

Terrorists had on March 7 stormed LEA Primary School, Kuriga, Chikun Local Government Area of Kaduna State, and kidnapped scores of pupils and teachers at about 8:20am immediately after the morning assembly.

NEWS

72nd Birthday: Tinubu shuns merriment, forbids associates from celebration

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has shelved all forms of celebration or merriment for his 72nd birthday which comes up Friday, March 29, 2024.

The President has also requested his family, friends and associates not to place any form of birthday goodwill advertorial messages in newspapers, as well as on radio and television stations.

This is in deference to the challenging times that Nigerians are currently facing, as well as the recent killings and security breaches in different parts of the country, according to a statement e-signed by the Special Adviser to the President on Informa-

tion & Strategy, Bayo Onanuga.

"As the leader of our country, President Tinubu in deference to this challenging times will not host any birthday event and does not want any of his associates and numerous well-wishers across the country to organise any celebratory event on his behalf or in his name," the statement said.

"President Tinubu appreciates the honour of being the leader of Africa's leading nation at this time and he is working very hard to make life better for the generality of our people.

"According to him, because of the present mood of the nation and recent killing of the officers and men of our Army

and Police in Delta State and recent spate of security breaches by criminal elements in different parts of Nigeria, there should be no form of birthday event and placing of birthday goodwill advertorial messages

in newspapers. Goodwill messages should not be placed on radio and television stations too.

"President Tinubu enjoins friends and associates who may wish to place goodwill ad-

vertorials to kindly donate the money to charity organisations of their choice in his name.

"Although the President appreciates the gallantry of our armed forces in freeing our children kidnapped in Kuriga,

Kaduna State and in Sokoto State, he will use the opportunity of his birthday to reflect and re-dedicate himself to the task of building a more stable, more secure, virile, prosperous and united Nigeria," it said.

Dangote doles out N15bn on food intervention across Nigeria

- **disburses 120,000 bags of rice in Kano**
- **we'll continue on this path, says Fatima**

AGENCY REPORT

President of Dangote Group, Aliko Dangote, launched his food intervention programme in Kano on Saturday. The food intervention programme, which will cost his foundation (Aliko Dangote Foundation ADF) close to N15 billion, started with the distribution of over one million bags of 10kg bags of rice across the 774 local government areas of the 36 states and FCT in Nigeria.

Speaking at the official flag-off of the intervention programme, Dangote said the initiative was a crucial step towards alleviating the ongoing economic challenges faced in the country.

He also emphasised the importance of compassion and generosity during the holy month of Ramadan, stressing that all stakeholders must play a part in supporting the government to alleviate hunger in the land.

"Our distribution of rice symbolises our commitment to upholding the values of compassion and solidarity which are at the core of our humanity," he said.

ADF will spearhead the food intervention programme which will run from March to early April 2024.

For the distribution of the over 1 million 10kg packs of rice across the country, he said, "The modalities for the programme involve collaboration with state and local governments and local community partners to ensure effective delivery of the rice to the most vulnerable across the country, regardless of state, tribe, gender, religion, politics, or other attributes."

Also speaking, Zouera Youssoufou, MD/CEO of the ADF, said the foundation was also distributing 10,000 iftar

meals during this month of Ramadan in Kano Municipality.

She said this was in addition to the Foundation's daily bread relief programme that is producing and distributing over 32,000 family-size loaves of bread across Kano and Lagos States every day since 2020 following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kano State Governor, Alhaji Abba Kabir Yusuf, who was at the flag-off ceremony, urged other wealthy Nigerians to emulate Aliko Dangote by supporting the government in the provision of palliative to cushion the harsh economic condition in the country.

"I do not have enough words to express my heartfelt gratitude to Alhaji Aliko Dangote on behalf of the good people of Kano State," Governor Yusuf said.

"This is because the gesture he is offering today will undoubtedly alleviate the burden of many families facing economic hardship in our state. I urge all other wealthy individuals and businesses in our community to take heed of this noble example set by the Dangote Group and extend similar gestures of support to those in need in our dear state," he said.

In a chat with the press at the programme, Group Executive Director, Commercial, Fatima Aliko Dangote, said the company would not rest on its oars and would continue to support the poor and vulnerable Nigerians.

"This programme marks the latest nutrition and humanitarian intervention by the Foundation, continuing its tradition of impactful philanthropy. Since the 1990s, the Foundation has been providing 10,000 cooked meals daily to the vulnerable in Kano State, reaching hospitals, schools, care homes, prisons, mosques, and individuals," she said.



MINISTER'S VISIT:

L-R: Director, Distribution, Federal Ministry of Power, Engr. Baba Umara Mustapha; Managing Director, Transmission Company of Nigeria (TCN), Engineer Sule Abdulaziz; Managing Director, Group Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, MOJEC, Ms Chantelle Abdul; Minister of Power, Chief Adebayo Adedun; Chairman MOJEC, Mrs Mojisola Abdul; Managing Director, Nigeria Electricity Management Services Agency, Engineer Tukur Aliyu, and Chief Technical Adviser, Oladayo Olowoniyi, during the visit of the Minister to MOJEC International office in Lagos.

NAPTIP warns of fake oil and gas jobs in West African countries

- **alerts Nigerians to new tricks by human traffickers**

The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) has uncovered a new ploy by some suspected human traffickers who are exploiting coordinated global brand trademarks and making unrealistic oil and gas job offers to traffic unsuspecting youths and other classes of people to neighbouring West African countries for various forms of exploitation.

Director-General of NAPTIP, Prof Fatima Waziri-Azi, revealed this alarming trend at the Agency's Headquarters in Abuja while discussing emerging trends in human trafficking for the year 2024.

In recent times, NAPTIP has redoubled its efforts through enhanced partnership, collaboration, diligent prosecution, and extensive awareness campaigns aimed at bolstering its operations, resulting in a significant increase in convictions of human traffickers.

"As part of our comprehensive enlightenment strategies to equip Nigerians with timely and accurate information to reduce their vulnerability, we have received reports indicating that traffickers have adopted new tactics to lure unsuspecting victims, predominantly to Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, and other West African nations," Prof.

Waziri-Azi said.

"Under the guise of lucrative employment opportunities in gold mining and oil companies, victims are enticed with promises of monthly incomes as high as nine hundred dollars (\$900.00), which, as always, are blatant lies.

"Victims are often instructed to bring up to eight hundred and fifty thousand naira (N850,000) for documentation and other logistical expenses. Upon arrival at their destination, traffickers confiscate this money, along with the victims' phones and other personal belongings.

"The targeted demographic includes male and female victims aged between 15 and 35

years old. They are typically trafficked through the waterways of Ode Jetty in Lagos en-route to Benin Republic and other parts of the West African region. Some victims are also trafficked via land routes," she said.

Reiterating her earlier appeal to Nigerians, she urged citizens to exercise caution, ask questions, and seek a second opinion before accepting any tempting offers.

"Do not allow desperation to cloud your judgment," she said, adding that NAPTIP remains committed to combating human trafficking and protecting the rights and dignity of all Nigerians.

CJID, DUBAWA equip Edo journalists with digital, fact-checking skills

TOBORE JEROME &
JENNIFER OSADOH

In a bid to equip Edo journalists with essential digital skills, fact-checking tools, and enhanced capabilities in election reporting, the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID) and Dubawa, with sponsorship from Google News Initiative, recently organized a groundbreaking training programme in Edo State.

The two-day training, which took place at the Edo Heritage

Hotel in the state's capital Benin City, brought together journalists from various media outlets within the state and its environs.

The training was aimed to address the evolving challenges faced by journalists in the digital age, including misinformation, disinformation, and the need for accurate reporting during elections.

One of the highlights of the training was the in-depth sessions understanding information disorder, its types, drivers and effects as well as steps and methodology of fact checking.

Also participants were exposed to cutting-edge techniques for digital verification. This segment was geared towards equipping them with the tools needed to verify images, and video files against alteration and fabrication as well as misleading contents.

Another crucial aspect of the training focused on fact-checking tools and techniques. With the proliferation of fake news and misleading information, journalists play a vital role in upholding the integrity of news

and information.

The training also exposed journalists on ways to detect fake news, fact-check information, safety measures to be taken and be the drivers of adequate reporting of verifiable stories as Edo 2024 governorship election draws near.

There were several practical sessions to boost the capacity of the trained journalists, ranging from Google Pinpoint, Google Trends, Fact-Check Explorer, Data gif, Scamadviser, as well as Digital Risk Assessment and Risk Management.

InsideEdo

Stakeholders flay EIA meeting, accuse Presco Plc of subverting justice

LUCKY EFESI

Stakeholders in Orogho Community in Orhionmwon Local Government Area of Edo State have condemned in totality the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) meeting convened by the management of Presco Plc, which was recently held at a

popular hotel in Benin City, saying it was not in the best interest of the people.

Meanwhile, Presco Plc, in a statement by its Relations Manager, Tony Uwajie, reaffirmed the resolution of his office in respect of the EIA meeting, which according to him, was adequately attended by the representatives of 11 commu-

nities invited.

Speaking on behalf of the Enogie in council, HRH Engr. Patrick Akenzua, Odionwere and elders, during a peaceful protest to dissociate themselves and register their displeasure over the EIA meeting, Ikponmwosa Osayomore, the General Secretary, Ekhaton Lucky, Edomwonyi Augustine,

and Ilawagbon Jolly, berated Presco Plc for among others, convening a meeting of EIA without first holding meeting with Orogho Community.

Secondly, they accused Presco Plc of giving autonomy to quarters to wit; Obagie Nunuamen, Obanakhoro, Iwevbo, Ugbigun and others under the Orogho Community, thereby

making them an independent villages, a development, according to them that is capable of causing a communal crisis in the locality, especially when it became glaring that the Presco Plc has given a Sokponba estate status to its operational scope instead of bearing Orogho reserve.

The youths also accused Presco Plc of circumventing justice by not entering into Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Orogho Community, being the principal host since it has been in operation for the past nine years.

They, however, appealed to Oba Ewuare 11 and Governor Godwin Obaseki to intervene to bring justice, as the people of Orogho Community are groaning over the excesses of the palm oil company.

But in a swift reaction, Tony Uwajie, Presco Plc Relations Manager, lamented their actions, pointing out that the invitation to the EIA meeting was absolutely delivered through the Enogie, who is both administrative and traditional head and the protest should not have arisen.

He maintained that Presco Plc had fulfilled its corporate social responsibilities to the 26 host communities, including Orogho Community.

He said the Sokponba estate

was named after Sokponba reserve, which ascribes to Orogho, was not to reduce its value but to reflect the government reserves for ease of identification.

He cited Obaretin Forest Reserve, from which the Presco Plc estate derived its name, stressing that the MoU was part of the Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) meeting that was disrupted by fracas that ensued during an earlier meeting convened to chart a way forward.

Uwajie noted that Presco Plc has increased the four scopes of studies for yearly scholarship grant to 14, thereby giving the opportunity to host communities to produce graduates that could occupy managerial positions as a way of creating jobs for the indigenes.

He clarified that the 14,400 acres of land was duly transferred to Presco Plc by Oba Erediauwu of blessed memory and that the remaining 2,500 hectares of land was got from the Urhonigbe Forest Reserve by the authority of the Edo State government, which makes a total of 17 hectares of land it is occupying, just as he advised them to remain patient as Presco Plc CSR remains robust to bring development in line with the expectations of the host communities.



AMATEUR BOXING:

Dr Tom Obaseki, Oredo Local Government Area Chairman (2nd r), and others as Oredo wins the Amateur Boxing Competition organized by the International Amateur Boxing Association, at the weekend.

Enogie of Oye-Iyanomo debunks report of causing problem in community

The Enogie of Oye-Iyanomo village in Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, Alfred Erhauiy Osagie, has debunked the report that he is the one causing problems in the community and also clarified issues surrounding the barricade made across the illegal road created by some persons from Iyanomo.

Speaking on behalf of Enogie Alfred Erhauiy Osagie, his counsel, Daniel Noah Osa-Ogbegie Esq., made clarification on the road said to have been barricaded by some people from Iyanomo and other issues that were published.

He said the barricade was put there in the first place because the road itself is not an approved road; it was mischievously created to breach the security of the community.

He noted that "everyone in the community has a responsibility to ensure the security of its community, the direct access road that leads into the community is what every indigene that means well for the community uses. But these characters who want to be

mischievous for the purpose of breaching the security of the community created an obscure road, which hitherto was a path way they expanded to become a road for vehicular movement so that they can use that to bypass the main road that leads into the community."

He further said that when they saw it has created security breach for the community and as the head in the community the Enogie will be held responsible and accountable for security lapses and breaches, a meeting was held to find out who created the road but nobody owned up and the only way to go about it was to ensure nobody crosses the road, and it was barricaded.

The counsel subsequently said that the Enogie is trying to bring peace and harmony to the community by ensuring there is security, he did not say he owns the land, he is holding the land on behalf of the Oba of Benin.

On autonomy, the counsel said some characters in the community are trying to use the issue of autonomy to now want to begin to grab land that they

do not have titles of. He pointed out that these lands they want to be selling or that they are already selling, can they tell the people how they came about them, who gave them titles to the lands they are selling and under what authority; or did they get authority from the Oba to administer those lands, did they get the authority from the governor of the state to administer these lands; was the land alienated to them for them to now be selling, which is what is called land grabbing. The issue is also before the Edo State Private Property Committee, hhe said.

Continuing, the counsel to the Enogie informed that Oye-Iyanomo is one indivisible community; the Enogie was installed by the Oba of Benin in 2022 as the Enogie of Oye-Iyanomo. He noted also that there is nothing like the designation of acting Odionwere under the Benin Native Law and Customs, and since 2015 they have been having acting Odionwere and not substantive Odionwere, they should go to the palace that they want their own Odionwere.

Skills development: Edo youth commissioner lauds Skillup Naija

EUBALDUS ENAHORO

Edo State Commissioner for Youth and Humanitarian Affairs, Hon. Zubairu Dada Abubakar, has commended Skillup Naija for directing the energies of youths positively away from indulging in social vices.

The commissioner, who made the commendation during a courtesy call to his office by officials of Skillup Naija and contestants currently contesting for cash prizes of over N2 million in the Edo State Teens Craft Competition (Edocraft 2024), said the Ministry will collaborate with Skillup Naija to ensure that the youths are occupied.

According to the commissioner, "When the young ones are positively occupied, they will not involve themselves in social vices like cultism, drug abuse and cybercrime. I am very impressed with the demonstration by the contestants in the Teens Craft Competition and it is an indication that there is still hope in Edo State and Nigeria in general.

"The best way to catch them young is to assist them actualize

their potentials and that is what Skillup Naija is doing. Our job is to give the youths hope and that is why we and other Ministries in the state are going to collaborate with Skillup Naija."

The Director, Skillup Naija, Dr. Kenneth Otidi, said the organization was set up to promote and encourage young minds that are skilful, noting, "The Edo Teens Enterprise Campaign (EdoTEC-Project Catch them Young) is a comprehensive initiative designed to Skillup and empower young Edo sons and daughters, through sensitization programmes on skills development, creative and innovative competitions, shape and personality testing and entrepreneurship training using the Skillup Naija craft educational resource, 'Skills to Wealth: A complete Entrepreneurship Guide to Turn Skills to Wealth'.

"This project will run for a period of six months with a tour round the 18 local government areas, and it aims to directly impact at least 50,000 young sons and daughters of Edo currently on the streets and those that will be grad-

uating from our public secondary schools by August this year.

"The mission is to ignite the spirit of innovation and enterprise in them, by empowering them with the necessary skills and resources to become future leaders and job creators as they prepare to graduate from high school."

He disclosed that the flag-off ceremony of this campaign will take place at the Convocation Arena, Benson Idahosa University, off Upper Adesuwa Grammar School Road on Friday, May 3, 2024.

Some of the contestants demonstrated what they have created to the admiration of the Commissioner for Youth and Humanitarian Affairs.

The director continued by stating that the flag-off ceremony of this campaign will gather stakeholders from various sectors, including education, business, and politics. According to him, the event promises to be very inspiring, featuring skills development and entrepreneurship induction from guest speakers, interactive workshops, exhibition of mind-blowing craft innovative works from young edolites.

Who stopped *Izakhue, Isoton*?

ODUWA SAM IMAGBE

One significant relevance and traditional importance of Emotan in the Benin cultural values was the homage paid to the Emotan statue during burial ceremonies. Burial of the dead was not complete or deemed to be conclusive without the visit of those directly involved in such burials during *Izakhue* and *Isoton*. And these burial ceremonies usually take seven days.

Immediately after the burial (interment) of the deceased, the next stage is *Iwa-orimwin*, whereby intricate family rites are performed. Thereafter, on the third day, *Izakhue* is performed. This *Izakhue*, which is a compulsory rite by all the children and relatives of the deceased, is a procession of dance led by the most senior son of the deceased to Emotan where cowries, native chalk and some coins are offered. The priest known as *Okae-eronmwon*, on receipt of these very important items, then prays for the children.

On the fifth day, *Isoton* is performed by all the children without any exemption. Each of them also had to visit Emotan in a procession of dance that attracts friends and well-wishers, while on the seventh day, very early in the morning, we have what is known as *Isueranfua*, marking the end of the ceremony.

This procedure as described above was the traditional way of burying a true Benin son and daughter. However, this is no longer practiced. It appears as if those who are supposed to enforce this aspect of our tradition no longer consider it necessary to continue with it. Today, people go for a three-day burial arrangement while the celebrants are asked to monetize the traditional demand for the family rites.

Where did this tradition seemingly leave the chart of

our culture? Firstly, the upsurge in crime was identified as being responsible for the demise of this practice. Some believed that because of the experiences of most people in the hands of criminals, the idea of going to wake-keeping during the night was not encouraging.

Secondly, some of their new-found religions forbid them from participating in the family rites. This was the period they introduced what they now refer to as "Christian burial". This brought about the "monetization" of family rites. The question now is, what is the difference between the "Christian All Night" and the traditional wake-keeping?

Izakhue and *Isoton* are held during the day, like the Christians who carry out evangelism and crusades. Most crusades are usually held at night. We have heard stories of the activities of some pastors during their "All Night" prayer sessions. Unless there are so many children from the deceased, *Isoton* usually doesn't exceed 6pm.

The monetization of family rites is today doing more harm than good. It is at this juncture that one appeals to the sole custodian of the Benin cultural heritage, Omo N' Oba Nedo, Uku Akpolokpolor, Oba Ewuare 11, to re-visit this very aspect of our tradition, thereby enhancing the importance of Emotan. Nobody is against "Christian burial", but it should not be at the expense of *Izakhue* and *Isoton*.

The story of Emotan needs to be re-written; if not for those who are tourists, let it be for Benin sons and daughters who are yet unborn. Otherwise, it might just be seen as one of those statues that adorn strategic positions all around Benin City.

Meanwhile, a prominent Benin Chief who is also an authority in Benin culture, Chief Osuan, said only those who are within the moat are expected

to visit the Emotan during burial ceremonies. He agreed that at present, it is still being practiced even though Christianity has greatly influenced it.

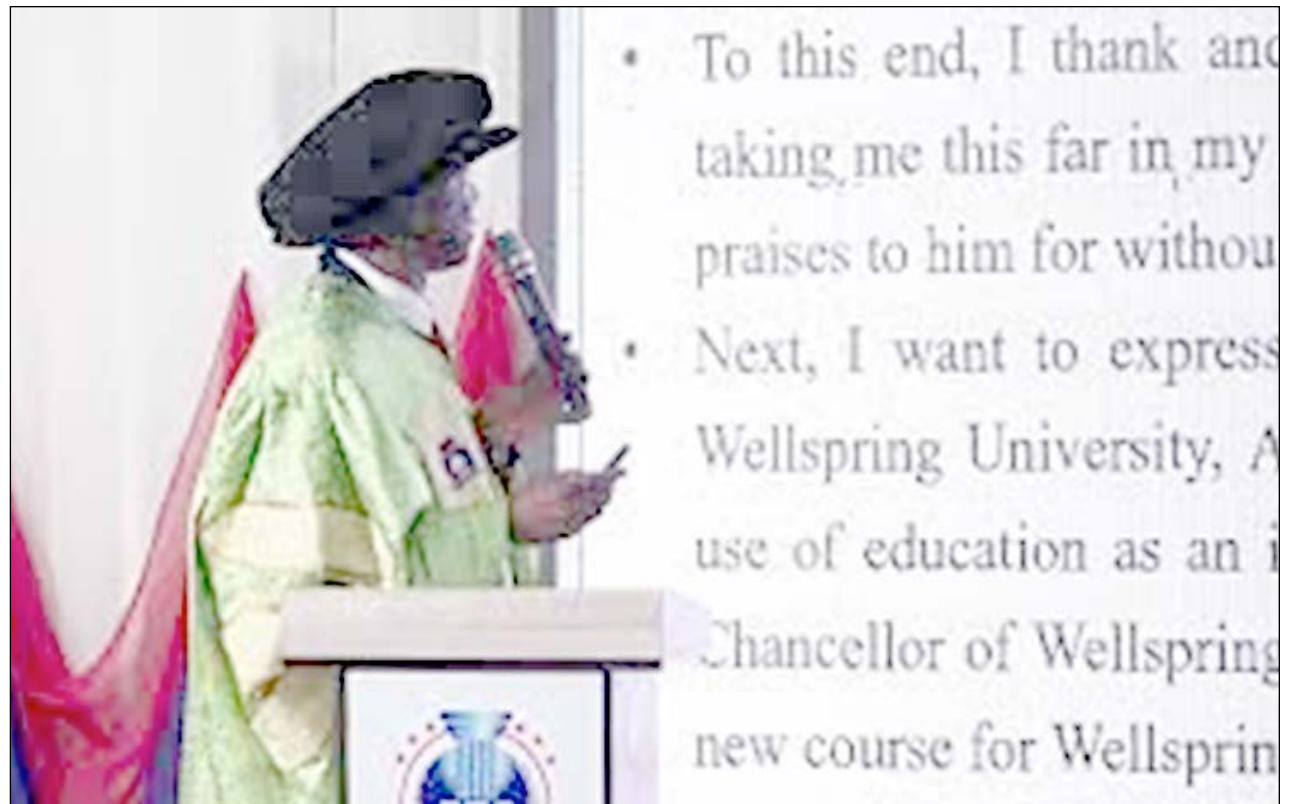
According to Chief Osuan,

every society has its values which indigenes adhere to. But these very aspects of Benin culture are often done by monetization, depending on how the children of the deceased want

to do it. He, however, added that Benin tradition is very clear on the items used during the ceremony and this has to do with the beliefs of the people.

"Life is panoramic, culture is diversionary. As life evolves, things also change. This is vice versa," he said.

Oba ghato Okpere, Ise.



FIRST INAUGURAL LECTURE:

Professor Enyinna Okpara delivering a lecture titled: "Rethinking & Repositioning Nigeria's Tax System: Panacea for Nigeria's Public Debt Time Bomb" when Wellspring University held its first inaugural lecture in Benin City.

Wellspring University holds first inaugural lecture

JENNIFER OSADOH

Wellspring University held its first inaugural lecture centering on the critical theme: "Rethinking & Repositioning Nigeria's Tax System: Panacea for Nigeria's Public Debt Time Bomb".

The event, which took place at the University's multipurpose hall in Benin City, the Edo State capital, witnessed a gathering of academicians from across the nation, members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN), dignitaries and students eager to delve into the pressing issue of Nigeria's fiscal sustainability.

Delivering the lecture, Professor Enyinna Okpara, a distinguished professor of Accounting and Finance, an Associate Member of ICAN, and current Dean of Social and Management Studies of Wellspring University, captivated the audience with his insightful analysis and bold propositions. Drawing from years of research and experience, Prof. Okpara articulated the dire need for a paradigm shift in Nigeria's approach to taxation.

Highlighting the looming threat of the country's escalating public debt, Prof. Okpara emphasized the urgency for proactive measures.

"I wish to state that the problem of Nigeria's Public Debt Time Bomb remains threatening as the current state of Ni-

geria's indebtedness does not call for cheer. This is based on the existential reality that as of the second quarter of 2023, external and domestic debt stood at N87.38 trillion (\$113.42bn)," he said.

According to Prof. Okpara, "The key component of any tax reforms hinges on the level of awareness and education of tax matters on the part of those whose obligation it is to pay tax.

"An effective tax reform is a good and effective tax structure that clearly defines who pays what tax and at what period as well as an enduring tax culture that encourages citizens to file their tax returns in an effort to fulfill their obligations."

The crux of Prof. Okpara's argument lies in the inefficiencies and loopholes pervasive within Nigeria's current tax framework thus advocating for a comprehensive overhaul that prioritizes equity, efficiency, and effectiveness.

"We need to remove tax waivers on import duties. The current Controller of Customs said that they recorded low income because the government gave N1.26tr as waivers and when you discover the people enjoying these waivers, you see that they are the big multinationals," he explained.

Speaking further, he highlighted the need for improving ideas on generating internal revenue sources for the states, building applications for e-rev-

enue, re-introducing toll-gates, and eliminating multiple taxations as ways to get out of the nation's current debt situation.

In his closing remarks, Prof. Okpara underscored the benefits of rejigging the economy rather than relying on debt.

"Rejigging the economy by creating avenues for employment of people creates opportunities for extra revenues through taxation. There is the danger that Nigeria is veering dangerously to debt default to her creditors and this portends grave danger to Nigeria's economic independence," Prof. Okpara remarked.

"One of the surest ways to address the debt burden is by generating all-inclusive tax revenue through rigorous and realistic tax reforms and restructuring," Prof. Okpara said.

The Vice Chancellor of the Institution, Prof. Isaac Rotimi Ajayi, as well as the founder of the University, Ambassador Daniel C. Isimoya, commended the inaugural lecturer on his insightful lecture delivered and challenged other academics of the university to follow in his steps, with the assurance of support from the institution's management.

Also present at the event was Chief Oye Akinsulire, a member of the Governing Council of ICAN, ably representing the association's President.

While commending Prof. Okpara, Chief Akinsulire thanked the institution's man-

agement for honouring the association, as their associate became the first to deliver the maiden inaugural lecture in the school.

"As the founder has honoured us ICAN, we shall do our best to ensure that Wellspring University feels the impact of ICAN positively from this moment forward," Chief Akinsulire said.

Chief Akinsulire also presented to the inaugural lecturer, Prof. Okpara, a cash prize of N1 million on behalf of ICAN.

Academicians and colleagues of Prof. Okpara shared congratulatory messages and applauded the precise delivery of the inaugural lecture. While applauding the inaugural lecturer, Dr. Joy Ihegbuniwe, Head of the Department of Business Administration at Wellspring University, also spoke on the topic's relevance to the present society.

"Even if it is just to hear where Nigeria is on the Map of the world in debt, it has a lot to do with us. Some of us don't even know what is happening but when you come to a place like this, you hear that as rich as we are as a country, we are borrowing, it's disheartening.

"We thank God somebody has made us see and know what is going on. It is very relevant to the country. We can't say a better time than now and I hope Nigerians will hear and do something about it," Dr. Ihegbuniwe stated.

Edo to commemorate World Theatre Day

OSARETIN ERO

The Edo State Ministry of Arts, Culture and Tourism, and Edo State Council for Arts and Culture in collaboration with National Association of Nigerian Theatre Art Practitioners (NAN-TAP), will next week Wednesday, March 27, 2024, celebrate this year's World Theatre Day. The World Theatre Day with the theme: Theatre and a Culture of Peace is a day set aside by the International Theatre Institute and the International Community to draw public attention to the need to embrace and appreciate theatrical performances.

Edo State Arts, Culture Tourism Commissioner, Hon. Uyi

Oduwa Malaka in a statement at the weekend, said the International Theatre Day aims to create awareness on the importance of theatrical arts, how theatrical performances have played in the area of entertainment and the improvement theatre has made over the years, according to the Media and Publicity Unit of the ministry.

Activities lined up for The World Theatre Day celebration, which include dance, drama, poetry, will take place at the Sir Victor Uwaifo Creative and Sound Hub on 24, Airport Road, Benin City, on Wednesday, March 27, 2024, at 9am and will attract theatre practitioners and competition by secondary school students in theatrical presentations.

South-SouthReport

Gov. Otu commissions 20km New Evacuation Road

● **commends Lafarge for investing in Cross River**

PATRICK ABANG, CALABAR

Cross River State Governor, Bassey Out, has commissioned the 20-kilometre New Evacuation Road, constructed by cement manufacturing company, Lafarge Africa Plc. The road, which construction started in 2010, spans from Mfamosing, extending through Abiati, Et-

amkpini and terminating at Odukpani Junction.

Speaking at the commissioning ceremony, Governor Otu assured that road users including customers and truck drivers would be safe while plying the road, saying, "Development comes with implications. When you have a road, the good people will use it and the bad people will also try to use it.

"I want to give you every assurance that the security agencies we have here are up and doing, I am not sure you will have issues on this road, particularly now that the security of the area has been highlighted. I will give everybody assurance, both the customers and the trucks that would ply the road that everybody would be safe.

"For Cross River government, I want to give you every assurance that we will continue to give you the enablement,

strength, proper and enabling environment for you to expand and succeed."

Governor Out, who commended Lafarge for taking trucks and traffic out of the town in view of associated road crashes, urged other corporate bodies to emulate the cement company.

"It would have been difficult to have about 200 trucks passing through the town, driving out, amid stress and accident. What you have done has taken this whole traffic completely

out of town and straight to the road where they are actually looking for as to take things out of the state. I commend you and wish that other corporate bodies would emulate Lafarge," the governor said.

The Group Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of Lafarge, Alade Akinyemi, traced the history of the New Evacuation Road to 2010 when it started, remarking that it later faced suspension due to critical inadequacies in geotechnical studies and design.

According to Akinyemi, the road so commissioned would improve safety, enhance productivity and drive economic growth.

Community leaders and traditional chiefs represented by the paramount ruler of Odukpani Local Government Area, His Royal Highness Etinyin Otu Asuquo, Otu Mesembe VI, thanked both the government and the company for the economy implications of the road to the people and the adjoining communities.

Delta Assembly passes resolution to ban use of Styrofoam

AJUWA VICTOR

Worried by the inherent health and environmental hazards associated with Styrofoam, also known as polystyrene, the Delta State House of Assembly (DTHA) has called for its ban in the state.

The House, in a resolution adopted at plenary presided over by the Speaker, Rt. Hon. Emomotimi Guwor, called on the State Governor, Rt. Hon. Sheriff Oborevwori, to ban the use of the product in Delta State, which they noted is hazardous to human life as well as poses great danger to the environment.

The resolution was sequel to a motion to that effect sponsored on the floor of the House by the Minority Leader and Member Representing Uvwie Constituency, Hon. Edefe Emakpor.

In the motion, Hon. Emakpor urged the House to call on the State Governor to direct the ministries of Health, Environment, Agriculture and Natural Resources as well as other relevant government agencies to immediately prohibit the usage of Styrofoam in the state.

The lawmaker explained that the prohibition of Styrofoam, which is a petroleum-based plastic made from styrene monomer, and used as cups, plates and other form of packaging for food and beverages in homes, hotels, restaurants, fast foods outlets and social gatherings, will prevent an impending health and environmental disaster.

Emakpor further called for an engagement of manufacturers and distributors of Styrofoam in the state to produce an alternative disposable paper cups and plates, even as he called for the constitution of a taskforce to monitor and enforce compliance.

He also stressed the need for the Ministry of Information and the Delta State Bureau for Orientation to sensitize and educate Deltans on the dangers

associated with the use of Styrofoam.

The lawmaker said it was the primary duty of government to ensure welfare and safety of the people as enshrined in Section 14 (2B) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as altered, emphasizing that the Delta State House of Assembly must live up to expectations.

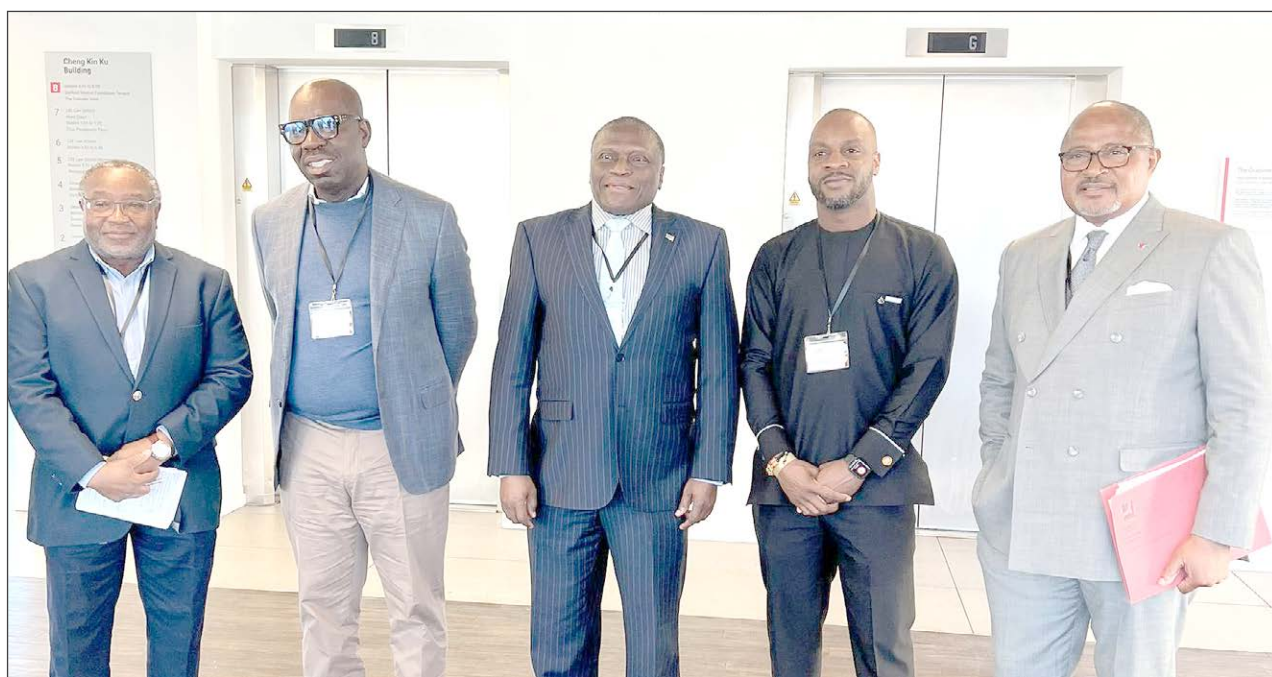
"The issue of public health must be given the attention it deserves. Styrofoam also known as polystyrene has scientifically proven to be hazardous in all manifestations. There is an urgent need for the State Governor, His Excellency, Rt. Hon. Sheriff Oborevwori to direct a ban of its use in Delta State.

"I therefore urge you my dear colleagues to support this motion, for this House to call on the Governor to prohibit the use of Styrofoam in the state to save lives as well as prevent impending environmental disaster," Emakpor emphasized.

The Deputy Speaker, Arthur Akpowowo, Majority Leader, Emeka Nwaobi, Deputy Majority Leader, Festus Okoh, Chief Whip, Perkins Umukoro as well as members representing Okpe and Ndokwa West, James Augoye and Charles Emetulu, stressed on the negative implication of Styrofoam on the overall well-being of humans and environment.

Other lawmakers who spoke, including the members representing Isoko South 2, Ferguson Onwo; Oshimili North, Frank Ensenwa; Warri South 1, Austin Uroye; Warri South 2, Benson Obire and Ughelli North 2, Spencer Ohwofa, said the chemical contained in it possesses cancerous properties, hence the need for its immediate ban to save lives.

Speaker, Rt. Hon. Emomotimi Guwor, directed the Clerk of the House, Otto Aghoghobia as well as the Assembly Committee on Legislative Compliance to ensure compliance to the resolution.



LSE AFRICA SUMMIT 2024:

L-R: Professor David Luke; Edo State Governor, Mr. Godwin Obaseki, Democratic Republic of the Congo Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ndolamb Ngokwey; Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Movemeback & The Continent Group, Charles Sekwalor, and Cameroon High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Albert Njoteh Fotabong, on the sidelines of the LSE Africa Summit 2024 in London, United Kingdom, at the weekend.

Delta confirms 4 Lassa fever cases, sets up emergency centres across state

AJUWA VICTOR

As part of measures to control the spread of Lassa fever, the Delta State government has called on residents to keep their environment clean always, do not expose food to rats and also ensure that rats do not breed in or around homes.

The Delta State Commissioner for Health, Dr. Joseph Onojaeme, gave the call in Asaba when he granted audience to journalists on the status of outbreak of Lassa fever in the state.

"In week 12, we have four confirmed cases so far recorded with a fatality rate of 50 percent, though the general fatality rate for Lassa fever is 1 – 15 percent. So we are doing everything humanly possible to ensure that we curtail the transmission from patient to health workers and from

patients to relatives," the commissioner said.

Explaining measures and efforts put in place so far, the commissioner said government is doing a lot on advocacy, especially to health workers and sensitization of residents to have a high index of suspicion when they see those cases.

He listed the affected local government areas where the cases were recorded as Okpe, Oshimili North, Oshimili South and Ndokwa East, and said that Emergency Operation Centres (EOCs) have been set up across the state to monitor the situation and ensure residents are aware of what is going on.

Delta State government is working closely with Irrua Specialist Hospital, Edo State, and has been able to achieve less than 24 hours of getting test results on Lassa fever as against what was commonly

obtainable, which was with the range of 72 hours, he said.

On her part, the state epidemiologist, Dr. Mildred Igumbor, said by definition one case of Lassa fever is an outbreak hence all hands should be on deck to ensure the elimination of the disease.

She explained that the state government has set up multi-sectorial EOC comprising officials of the Ministry of Environment and Agriculture and Natural Resources among others where several partners and several subject matter experts sit and deliberate on how to tackle the disease and its spread.

According to the state epidemiologist, Lassa fever is spread through contact with the fecal matter or urine of rats on foods hence we are sensitizing residents on the need for them to ensure rats don't get in contact with their food so that they

don't contract the disease at the first place.

"To ensure prevention control measures are in place in our health facilities, health workers must have a very index of suspicion. We are telling everyone that not all fever cases are malaria cases so if you are sick please go to any nearest health facility or qualified medical personnel to seek medical attention. So if you get there and the health personnel have a high level of suspicion you will be tested and with the result received such patient will be properly managed," she said.

Dr. Igumbor said the Isolation Centre in Federal Medical Centre Asaba, built by the Delta State government has the capacity for isolation and management of confirmed cases and if need be for referrals they would be transferred to Irrua Specialist Hospital, Edo State. @+234 806 956 8417

Cross River NUJ lauds Ogv. Otu over appointment of CPS, others

PATRICK ABANG, CALABAR

Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) Cross River State Council has lauded Governor Bassey Otu of Cross River State for appointing a seasoned and com-

petent journalist, and a former chairman of NUJ, Cross River State Council, Mr Nsa Gill, as the new Chief Press Secretary (CPS).

The Union also lauded the Governor for the appointment of Mr Linus Obogo as Special

Adviser on Media and Publicity.

A statement issued by the State Secretary of NUJ, Comrade Solomon Azu, specifically described the appointment of Nsa Gill as a round peg in a round hole, stressing that, the

appointment did not come to the union as a surprise considering the pedigree of Gill as one of the finest and hardworking journalist who has traversed the length and breadth of Nigeria in the course of discharging his duties.

The Union described Nsa Gill as a calm, gentle and humble person who devoted his time to advance development of journalism and hoped that, government would create conducive atmosphere for him to operate.

NUJ also congratulated the former Deputy Chief Press Secretary to the Governor Mr Linus Obogo on his appointment as Special Adviser to the Governor on Media and Publicity.

Comrade Solomon Azu urged Linus Obogo to work closely with the new CPS to enable them effectively project the image of the Governor and also bridge communication gap that may result in fake news or misinformation about government policies and programmes.

In the statement, they also

appreciate the Governor's humble beginning of strengthening his relationship with the media, hoping that, more journalists will be appointed to assist in bringing government closer to the people.

The Union urged all the appointees not to betray the confidence repose on them by working for the progress of the state instead of pursuing self interest above collective goal.

It then renewed the Union's unflinching support and cooperation to the Governor for a more robust relationship between NUJ and the administration, and charged the Governor to be open minded in suggestions of the people for the progress of the state as fixation with ideas without engagements is an aberration to democracy



ORIENTATION PANORAMA:

Deputy Speaker of Delta State House of Assembly, Rt Hon. Arthur Akpowowo (2nd l); Dr Latimore Oghenesivbe, CEO, Delta State Orientation Bureau (1st l), and On Air Personality, Blessing Usiagbada (r), during Orientation Panorama, the People's programme on Voice of Delta 97.9 FM Asaba.

Senator Nwaoboshi condemns killing of military personnel in Delta

AJUWA VICTOR

More condemnation still trails murder of 16 Army personnel attached to 'Operation Delta Safe' in Okuama community of Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State.

This time, it is from Senator Peter Onyelukachukwu Nwaoboshi, who said the culprits must be made to face the full consequences of their actions.

In a statement signed by the SPON Media, Senator Nwaoboshi noted that the sacrifices

made by the Commanding Officer and three other senior officers as well as 12 soldiers during the distressing incident would be forever remembered.

The statement extended the deepest condolences of the lawmaker to our President, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Federal Republic of Nigeria, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Chief of Defence Staff, Chief of Army Staff, the Nigerian Army and officers and men of Operation Delta Safe over the tragic loss of the officers

The officers are believed

to have come under attack by some youths during a peace mission to Okuama Community in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State.

"Sixteen is not a small number. To think that they were on a peacekeeping mission makes it further depressing. Delta State is known for its relative peace. Such an occurrence should be the last of its kind.

"Whatever led to the killings could have been handled with dialogue. These are people who defend our nation and must be accorded all the respect they

deserve. This must be investigated, so we know the root cause of this sad development. The culprits must be caught and prosecuted," he said.

He therefore appealed to the Nigerian Military to temper justice with mercy, and not to embark on reprisals attacks as a result of the ugly incident, and advised against executing vengeance on the entire community, but rather they should fish out the culprits and allow the law take its course.

"I extend my condolence to the family of every soldier who lost his life," he said.

WUEDA gets mobile court to prosecute environmental offenders in Warri, Uvwie environs

AJUWA VICTOR

The Delta State Ministry of Justice has approved a Mobile Court for Warri, Uvwie and Environs Special Area Development Agency (WUEDA) to prosecute environment law offenders in the area.

The Director-General of the Agency, Prince Godwin Ejinyere, disclosed this when he led a delegation of the Agency to visit the management of Uvwie Local Government Council, Effurun.

Prince Ejinyere told the acting chairman of the council, Mrs. Juliana Manager, who is the Head of Personnel Management that five magistrates had been assigned to the Agency, while a taskforce would be set up in a week's time to work with the Mobile Court.

Hon. Ejinyere noted that the local government would need to assign some of its health and environment officers to be incorporated into the taskforce for more effective enforcement.

He said Governor Sheriff Oborevwori was determined

to improve the aesthetics of Warri, Uvwie and their environs through the Agency.

He said the Agency was very ready to work with the Local Council towards changing the bad narratives about the once popular Oil City.

Responding, the acting chairman of Uvwie Local Government Council, Mrs. Juliana Manager, congratulated Hon. Ejinyere for his appointment as the DG of WUEDA, describing him as a square peg in a square hole, judging by his track record and pedigree.

The Uvwie Council boss promised that the Council would collaborate with the Agency as partners in progress to achieve the set goal and objectives.

The Treasurer to Uvwie Local Government, Mr. Bishop Etakebo, was among senior officers of the Council who joined Mrs. Manager to receive Prince Ejinyere and his team, comprising a WUEDA Board member, Mr. Isaac Itobi, and the Agency's Director of Administration and Finance, Mr. Simon Esi, among others.

USAID invests \$200m to tackle Nigeria's food crisis

NAOMI EWANSIHA

The United States government, through its international development agency, USAID, said it has invested \$200 million over the past five years in a groundbreaking partnership aimed at addressing Nigeria's food insecurity crisis. The announcement came from David Greene, Head of the United States Embassy in Nigeria, during the launch of the US government's Global Food Security Strategy Country Plan

for Nigeria in Abuja recently.

Greene emphasized USAID's commitment to improving food security and building household resilience across several Nigerian states, including Adamawa, Benue, Borno, Cross-River, Delta, Ebonyi, Gombe, Kaduna, Kebbi, Niger, and Yobe. The investment, spanning various agricultural initiatives, has not only targeted enhancing food security but also facilitated private sector development, generating over \$306 million in domestic sales and creating more than 23,000 jobs.

"USAID invested almost \$200 million in agriculture over the last five years to improve food security and build household resilience to shocks in Adamawa, Benue, Borno, Cross-River, Delta, Ebonyi, Gombe, Kaduna, Kebbi, Niger, and Yobe states.

"So, this Global Food Security Strategy, which we launch today, supports that commitment to improve food security in Nigeria. It builds on previous achievements and lessons learned, and prioritises inclusivity, value addition, climate

adaptation, and private sector engagement, including job creation," he said.

Acknowledging Nigeria's multifaceted food crisis exacerbated by factors such as insecurity, inflation, climate change, and post-harvest losses, Greene stressed the urgency of addressing these challenges. With over 35 percent increase in food prices recorded in January alone, even as millions of Nigerians living below the poverty line face heightened difficulties in accessing food.

"If we project out into the

future, global food demand will double by 2050, and yet at the same time key staple crops are showing a decrease of up to 30 percent," Greene said.

The launch of the Global Food Security Strategy Country Plan for Nigeria underscores a year of consultation and deliberation, emphasizing inclusivity, value addition, climate adaptation, and private sector engagement as pivotal strategies. Despite Nigeria boasting the sixth largest arable land area globally, it ranks sixth least prepared in

confronting climate change, highlighting the critical need for collaborative action.

Aliyu Abdullahi, Nigeria's Minister of State for Agriculture and Food Security, reiterated the government's commitment to mitigating food insecurity through innovative measures. Encouraging youth involvement in agriculture, leveraging ICT and artificial intelligence, Abdullahi emphasized the importance of strengthening Nigerian farmers' capacity and capability to transform agriculture into a thriving business.

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Abduction of students: The outcomes

Nigeria’s education system, envisioned as a beacon of hope and progress, now stands threatened by violence, exemplified by the frequent abduction of students by terrorists and militant groups targeting schools. The cases of the Chibok Girls (2014) and Dapchi Girls (2018) echo as reminders of the challenges facing Nigeria’s citadels of learning.

The past few weeks have witnessed a sad upsurge of this unsavoury event.

On a pleasant note, scores of schoolchildren abducted from Kuriga, Kaduna State, were released at the weekend, two weeks after they were taken away in what was one of Nigeria’s largest mass kidnappings in years.

The students, about 287 of them, were kidnapped by rampaging gunmen on motorcycles, sparking outrage and condemnation from several quarters, including the UN children’s welfare agency, UNICEF.

More than 1,680 schoolchildren have been kidnapped in Nigeria since the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State, with fear of attacks stopping some children from ever attending school, says Save the Children.

New data by Save the Children reveal that attacks on schools have been continuing and highlight the violence that schoolchildren and teachers face across Nigeria.

In addition to the abductions, over 180 schoolchildren were killed and nearly 90 injured in 70 attacks between April 2014 and December 2022, with an estimated 60 school staff kidnapped and 14 killed. Twenty-five school buildings were reportedly destroyed during that period.

The majority of these attacks took place in North-West Nigeria (49 attacks), followed by North-Central Nigeria (11 attacks).

These attacks have long-lasting consequences for communities and for children’s access to education, often leading to the mass withdrawal of children from school, as well as school closures. In the North-West state of Katsina, nearly 100 schools remain closed due to insecurity, affecting the education of over 30,000 children.

One in every five of the world’s out-of-school children is in Nigeria. Even though primary education is officially free and compulsory, about 10.5 million of the country’s children aged 5-14 years are not in school.

A 2022 UNESCO report notes that approximately 20 million Nigerian individuals of the country’s approximately 200 million population are not enrolled in school. This amounts to 10 per cent of Nigeria’s entire population and is more than the overall population of various countries in Africa.

The insurgency unleashed upon the country by Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP) and sundry criminals is, to an increasing extent, responsible for this and the scope is widening.

Meanwhile, Nigeria is in dire need of economic development and an enhanced quality of life for its citizens. An educated and skilled workforce is a key to this dream. The lack or shortage of education or skills within teeming populations then creates social, security and economic challenges which constitute daunting roadblocks to development. These include a lack of adequate and appropriate manpower to drive the economy in the future, as well as an increase in the wave of criminal activities.

As such, the Federal Government must, as a matter of urgency, come up with a plan to address the insurgency and random criminality and their wilting impact on school attendance. This plan must be well articulated with stated objectives, defined leadership, a reporting system, technology driven, with roles and timelines assigned. This is to ensure commitment, sustenance and result.

The out-of-school children syndrome and, indeed, the insurgency and criminality which give it verve are volcanos sizzling to erupt. A stitch in time saves nine.



Cartoon Corner

...that the people may know



Ten ways to stay happy at work



HAPPY WORKSPACE

by **OLAYINKA OPAEYE**

A WELL-BEING SPECIALIST AND CORPORATE WELLNESS STRATEGIST

Everything has a self-life, including the most sought-after job or promotion, relationship or marriage prayed for, possession longed for, or very much anticipated experience. For this reason, it's often believed that money cannot buy happiness. The exciting finding is that what cannot be purchased only promises lifelong happiness if we put in the work.

The "honeymoon phase," often referred to as the initial surge in excitement, is tied to hedonic adaptation. This concept is evident in the rate at which things return to normalcy regardless of how heightened a positive or negative feeling was.

As we celebrated the International Day of Happiness on March 20th, I wanted to write about how employees can maintain a happy workplace. Reminiscing on how far we have come in creating happy work environments in organizations, the need to sustain such environment revealed that creating a happy workplace is just the tip of the iceberg. Much more goes into acceptance and maintenance, which should always be supported and addressed. Therefore, a happy workplace has its honeymoon period, even though the secret to thwarting its hedonic adaptation is building a system that overcommunicates and reinforces it.

So, when I polled, "What makes you happy?" a couple of days ago, I realized anyone who picked work must be an outlier judging from the votes. What stood out was how diverse we are regarding what makes us happy. Even though my definition of happi-

ness differs from yours, being happy at work has a somewhat synchronized meaning. Adapting Maslow's hierarchy of needs, what motivates us to work is all within those five layers, with each rung of the ladder identifying people's level of engagement and commitment. Therefore, sharing how to stay happy at work should come in handy here.

Discover yourself: discovering oneself is a path to finding purpose and meaning in life, which guarantees happiness. Anyone can build a career from virtually anything, including personal experiences. A quick path to self-discovery is using Dr. Akanimo's DEED Pathway.

Be reliable: reliability comes with consistency and being on top of things. Although consistency may be more challenging than is often required, it's the primary reliability marker. This attribute can help you become more efficient and effective as an employer.

Be accountable: as professionals who have mastered the craft and honed their skills, you should never lose sight of the need to be accountable to someone. Being accountable prevents experts from making errors, helps them receive constructive feedback, and encourages improvement on past performances.

Embrace change: since change is inevitable, we should always endeavor to accept it. One of the best ways to accept a good change is to be open-minded and give it your best shot. When fully explored, you may be pleasantly surprised at how valuable and transformational the new ini-

tiative, tool, resource, connection, or position can be.

Have values: your values will always rein you in as they often serve as your conscience, prompting or prodding you whenever you veer off track at work. Having at least three core values works perfectly well. Aside from being the voice of reasoning at work, having values creates the opportunity to match organizational goals with personal interests for value alignment. If there is harmony, you will surely be happy where you work.

Build relationships: human beings are social creatures. Even when you are goal-oriented, building good work relationships helps you avoid stepping on toes or getting trampled upon. Aside from knowledge/expertise, interpersonal skills are required

to open the doors to where expertise needs to function. However, while at it, be careful not to break the rules of professional relationships. Always remember to practice vault and fairness.

Complement weaknesses: many people become unhappy at work because they compare themselves to their colleagues or co-workers. Identifying your strengths and weaknesses will change your perspective and lift your mood. Instead of lamenting your shortcomings, put your core strengths to great use while you find someone to complement your work in areas that are not your strong suits. You are not a superbeing, and even superheroes drop the ball sometimes.

Keep learning: acquiring new skills or reading daily benefits your brain and overall wellbeing. Having intel-

lectual conversations at work boosts your confidence and puts you in a positive light. Focusing alone on your desk function will not take you far, let alone make you happy. Continuous learning always makes you grow and bloom.

Practice generosity: being generous transcends giving out money or gifts. Being generous without bearing gifts is a skill everyone needs to learn to stay happy. Be generous with greetings, pleasantries, courtesy, kindness, gratitude, compliments, empathy, and thoughtfulness. Be the life of the party in your workplace. Make everyone happy to see you and watch how much you look forward to going to work daily. Be generous with eating healthy and exercising too. These go a long way in helping your mood and productivity.

Manage stress: never work at the expense of your health or vice versa, as this will cause a disruption that can lead to resentment. So, if you love your job but your health or life is at risk due to it, settle down to evaluate things. Find the root causes and deal with them by choosing discomfort over resentment. Having an uncomfortable conversation with your boss about how you prefer to work on health grounds is better than resenting the entire organization for your failed health.

CALL TO ACTION

What makes you happy? A. Family B. Work C. Money D. What money cannot buy. I would like to know if your job makes you happy. Kindly send an email to oopaleye@gmail.com.

Opaeye, a wellbeing specialist and corporate wellness strategist, writes from Lagos

Have values: your values will always rein you in as they often serve as your conscience, prompting or prodding you whenever you veer off track at work. Having at least three core values works perfectly well. Aside from being the voice of reasoning at work, having values creates the opportunity to match organizational goals with personal interests for value alignment. If there is harmony, you will surely be happy where you work.

Rekindling hope and optimism

ABUBAKAR SADIQ YUSUF

In the face of the numerous challenges that Nigeria faces, it is crucial that we do not lose hope or become pessimistic about the future. Rekindling hope and optimism is necessary to move the country forward and to promote sustainable development.

One way to do this is to focus on the positive strides that have been made in the country. Despite its challenges, Nigeria has a rich history, diverse culture, and a resilient people who have consistently shown remarkable fortitude in the face of adversity. We must focus on these strengths and use them as a foundation for building a better future.

Another way to promote hope and optimism is to acknowledge and address the issues that are holding Nigeria back. These include corruption, insecurity, poverty, and poor infrastructure. By tackling these issues head-on, we can create a better future for all Nigerians.

Moreover, we must encourage and invest in the youth of Nigeria. Young people represent the future of the country and as such, must be given the tools, resources, and opportunities to become productive members

of society. This includes investing in education, promoting youth entrepreneurship, and creating an enabling environment that empowers young people to contribute positively to the country's development.

Furthermore, it is essential to promote national unity, respect for diversity and inclusivity in all facets of Nigerian life. Our diversity is one of our greatest strengths, and we must harness it to promote peace, unity and development in the country. An inclusive society is a stronger society, and every Nigerian deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

Rekindling hope and optimism is crucial to Nigeria's development. By focusing on the country's strengths,

acknowledging and addressing its challenges, investing in the youth, and promoting national unity and inclusivity, we can create a better future for all Nigerians.

The past year has been a challenging one for people all around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has upended lives and livelihoods, causing widespread illness and death, economic upheaval, and social isolation. In many ways, the pandemic has laid bare the existing inequalities and injustices of our societies, revealing the fragility of our systems and the limitations of our leadership.

And yet, even in the face of these immense challenges, there are reasons for hope and optimism. Over

the past year, we have seen countless examples of people coming together to support one another. Healthcare workers, essential workers, and everyday people have showed bravery and compassion, risking their own safety to care for others. Scientists and researchers have worked tirelessly to develop vaccines and treatments, offering us a pathway out of this crisis. And governments and organizations have introduced policies and initiatives aimed at protecting vulnerable populations and reviving economies.

But hope and optimism are not just feelings they are also catalysts for action. It is up to all of us to build upon the progress we have made and to continue working towards a better future. This means addressing the root causes of the inequalities and injustices that the pandemic has exposed, and working to create more resilient and equitable societies.

One way to do this is by investing in education and healthcare. By providing equitable access to quality education and healthcare, we can ensure that everyone has the tools they need to succeed and thrive. This includes not only physical health but also mental and emotional well-being.

Another way is by promoting economic opportunity and entrepreneur-

ship. By supporting small businesses and empowering individuals to create their own economic opportunities, we can reduce economic inequality and increase social mobility.

We can also work towards building more sustainable and resilient communities. By investing in renewable energy, conservation, and green infrastructure, we can create more sustainable and resilient communities that are better equipped to withstand future crises.

Perhaps most importantly, we can foster a culture of empathy and solidarity. By recognizing the common humanity that binds us all, and by working together to support one another, we can create a more just and inclusive world.

Rekindling hope and optimism in the aftermath of a crisis is not easy, but it is necessary. We must remain steadfast in our commitment to building a better world, even in the face of adversity. By doing so, we can emerge from the pandemic stronger and more resilient than before.

Yusuf writes from Mass Communication Department, Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic, Bauchi

Another way to promote hope and optimism is to acknowledge and address the issues that are holding Nigeria back. These include corruption, insecurity, poverty, and poor infrastructure

Niger Delta development as word made flesh

When Mr Chiedu Ebie, the Chairman, Governing Board, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), during a send-forth held for retired staff of the Commission, in December 2023, at the Commission's headquarters in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital, noted that the commission is poised to fast-track development of the Niger Delta region, only but few paid attention to that remark, but with the current accelerated and coordinated development ongoing in the region, it is obvious that Ebie's remark has become a word made flesh.

In the referenced statement, Ebie said, "The current governing board of NDDC is committed to quickening the pace of development of the Niger Delta region to enable the people to benefit democratic dividends. So, we intend to put in our best to ensure that we change the narrative concerning the NDDC and the perception about the Niger Delta out there. But more importantly, we need to work as a team to bring the much-needed development to the region."

Essentially, this promised commitment today reflects in the nine mandated states and exemplified in critical projects as designed by the agency; sustainable livelihood, building partnership, lighting up the Niger Delta, improved youth capacity and skill base, stakeholders engagement, project hope for renewed hope, among others.

To further en flesh the agency's capacity to develop the region in the interest of every Niger Deltans, the Managing Director/CEO, NDDC, Dr. Samuel Ogbuku, while speaking during an on-the-spot assessment of the Niger Delta Regional Specialist Hospital, on Friday, March 15, 2024,

at Hospital Road, Port Harcourt, said, "In line with Mr President's marching orders to ensure we embark on Legacy Projects that will impact the people of Niger Delta positively, the NDDC is committed to finishing the Niger Delta Regional Specialist Hospital (Cardio-vascular and Orthopedic).

"It is on this basis that we are going round to revive stalled and abandoned projects that are of immense value to the Region. Funds have been expended; hence, we want to ensure that we add value to those funds by completing these projects for the use of the people. The Region lacks Specialist Hospitals, so when completed, it will afford Niger Deltans easy access to medical services and improve medical tourism in the Region. Our intention is not just to finish this project, but to put it to use immediately by going into Partnership with reputable medical organizations of international pedigree and technical know-how in Hospital Management. We shall finish, commission and put to use, this facility before the end of the year."

Again, in keeping up with that burning desire of finishing strong in lighting up the region, the Governing Board of the NDDC, a few days ago, announced the completion and imminent inauguration of the 132/33kv electricity substation at Ode-Erinje in Okitipupa Local Government Area of Ondo State. A feat it described as significant as it heralded the planned handover of the sub-station to the Transmission Company of Nigeria (TCN) for operational management.

The scope of the power project, it was reported, covers the evacuation of light from Omotosho with a step down at Ode-Erinje, Okitipupa, through a 132KV double circuit transmission

line with two 30/40MVA transformers. The transmission lines running through Ode-Erinje, Okitipupa, passes through 145 electricity towers.

Aside from the awareness that the milestone followed the performance bond recently signed by the Commission with the Ministry of Niger Delta Development, also very impressive is the disclosure that when operational, the electricity sub-station will illuminate over 2,000 communities across five local government areas within the oil-producing region of Ondo State, significantly impacting lives by ending decades of darkness.

In the same line of action, Edo, Delta and Bayelsa states have reportedly received positive attention from the agency's light-up Delta project as the following communities, towns and villages have been reportedly provided with Solar Lights = 150 – Ikoro, Edo State. (2). Solar Street Lights 229 – Gbaraun town, Bayelsa State. (3). Solar Street Lights = 229 – Adobu in Bomadi, Delta State. (4). Solar Street Lights = 229 – Okoloba, Bomadi, Delta State. (5). Solar Street Lights, 229 – Odimodi, Delta State. (6). Solar Street Lights, 229 – Biniebi-AMA Community, Delta State. (7). Solar Street Lights, 229 Ogulagha, Delta State.

Others reportedly include: (8). Solar Street Lights, 229 Sokebolou, Delta State. (9). Solar Street Lights, 458 Okerenkoko/Bibopre Zion, Delta State. (10). Solar Street Lights, 458 Oporoza/Oporoza Zion, Delta State. (11). Solar Street Lights, 229 Igoba/Peppe-Ama, Delta State. (12). Solar Street Lights, 229 Inikorogha/Azama, Delta State. (13). Solar Street Lights, 229 – Kurutie, Delta State. (14). Solar Street Lights 150 Kokodiagbene, Delta State. (15). Solar Street Lights, 150 Kunukunuma,



UTOMI'S NOTE

JEROME-MARIO CHIJOKE UTOMI
A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE ADVOCATE

Delta State. (16). Solar Street Lights, 150 Benikrukru, Delta State. (17). Solar Street Lights, 229 Kenyangbene and adjoining communities, Delta State. (18). Solar Street Lights, 229 OGBIN-BIRI Community, Delta State among others.

In the areas of strategic partnership, the NDDC with the World Health Organization (WHO) a while ago formalized a strategic alliance to execute an innovative health insurance project. Beyond this, numerous health programmes are in the pipeline, promising substantial advantages for the residents of the Niger Delta region.

Away from health to education, it is a common knowledge that after an intense and rigorous selection process largely driven by technology, the NDDC has awarded scholarship to 200 successful candidates from the region to pursue Master's Degrees overseas, a programme, which of course is an important component of the agency's human capital development that seeks to use education to change the fortunes of the region.

While the entire process may have climaxed with presentation of letters by Mr. Chiedu Ebie, NDDC board Chairman, to the prospective scholars, what is, however, newsy going by the process and outcome fairness that characterized the entire exercise, is that the pre-condition for sustainable development now exists in NDDC just as it takes good people to have good

agencies of government.

Adding context to the discourse, the NDDC Foreign Postgraduate Scholarship programme started in 2010, designed to produce top level professionals with technical knowledge, capacity and expertise to compete in oil and gas industry, as well as other sectors. So far, the NDDC has sponsored 2,708 scholars at both Masters and Ph.D levels since the inception of the programme.

In addition to the high level transparency which branded the process, and made it possible for most of the beneficiaries to be those that never knew anyone from the NDDC or anyone that works there, the unique outcome and other positive vibes have significantly made Deltans to hastily but rightly conclude that NDDC has finally got a board with the understanding that it is their duty to serve our communities and embrace its aspirations, both now and in the future, by assuring the people economic growth, education, health, security, stability, comfort, leisure opportunities and freedom in ways that will allow for the most conducive atmosphere to achieve the targets that will guarantee their welfare and make bright future possible for the people of the region.

Jerome-Mario is the programme coordinator (Media and Public Policy), Social and Economic Justice Advocacy (SEJA)

Photoshopping Princess and the perils of manipulation

AZU ISHIEKWENE

To encourage authenticity and hopefully slowly create a society where people are not ashamed – or afraid – to be who they are, perhaps we need to be less severe and more forgiving and transparent when we scrub those images. And yes, we must also learn to take ourselves a lot less seriously.

The press has been unkind to Kate Middleton, the Princess of Wales. I find it hard to understand why, of all the problems at this time, from the cost-of-living crisis to the war in Ukraine, and from the war in Gaza to the near total loss of trust in politicians, it is Kate's unguarded photoshop moment on Mother's Day, of all days, that is the obsession.

And there's no better time to catch the British press swooning with testosterone than when a member of the royal family trips. They go all out. Nothing smells like the scent of royal blood and the hounds spare no stone.

And so, it was last week that a number of newswire services recalled or stripped photoshopped images of Princess Kate and her three children from their dispatches. The kinder ones among the newspapers nailed every single offending spot on the photo with a red flag, labelling and listing the photographic infractions one by one.

Daily Mail circled 10 spots, with lengthy captions on what it described as Kate's "pic scandal." My heart bled for the Princess of Wales, but something deep inside kept saying, if this had been

Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex and famous Witch of Windsor, it would have been worse. I can imagine that the most generous description from the Daily Mail stable, for example, would have been something like, "Meghan in epic scandal!"

But what's the point of it, really? Since the outbreak of the so-called Kate pic scandal, I have been brooding over images that I see very often as DPs and also on some WhatsApp Status. I'm keeping myself to that microblogging site and the mainstream press. There's no need to bother with Insta, probably the worst photographic crime scene since Joseph Niepce invented the camera.

WHO IS THIS?

I have seen DP posts not remotely resembling folks that I know in real life. In a number of these meticulously airbrushed DPs, these same less than averagely endowed folks look so fine, faces nicely chiseled, neckties in place, or necklines plunging, and every strand of hair in place with poses like something out of Vanity Fair. You cannot sometimes help but zoom in and look again.

My anecdotal experience suggests that normal people, especially normal young girls and women, have fabricated more Kate Middleton moments than they can count. I have seen folks who are fat – that word has been banned by the language police – looking incredibly slim on their profiles or those who are black or brown looking all fair and incredibly white.

I have also seen folks with age-borne wrinkles, birth marks or

even a few blemishes or dimples in real life look breathtakingly flawless on their DPs. I have never stopped wondering what this digital filter is really all about.

If the Daily Mails of this world have to spotlight every single photoshopped celebrity image – never mind the millions of celebrity wannabes – God knows how many would be out of circulation or perhaps be standing trial in the court of public opinion along with the Princess of Wales.

I have shied away from digital make-over, not out of self-righteousness, but because I have accepted my flaws and physiological shortcomings as part of the gifts of an imperfect earth life. Why do people go to extra lengths to make over and then portray themselves in images that are not remotely who they are?

Of course, photo airbrushing didn't start with the Princess of Wales or the folk in that DP who's probably the aspirational version of the image you're looking at right now.

FAKERY INDUSTRY

Joseph Stalin erased enemies like Nikolai Yezhov, who played a significant role in the Great Purge out of photographs because he thought doing so would wipe away the man's memory from history. He didn't quite succeed.

In the 2004 presidential campaign, opponents of John Kerry spliced his photograph and that of actress and anti-war activist Jane Fonda to discredit his war record. And, come to think of it, this same Daily and Sunday Mail that have been unforgiving of the Princess of Wales fell flat

for the epic Kerry photo forgery!

Seven years later, an ultra-Jewish newspaper suspected of religious influence erased Hillary Clinton and Audrey Tomason from a Situation Room picture taken moments before President Barack Obama authorised the strike on Osama bin Laden. Here again, as in the Kerry pic scandal, the press was duped.

Of course, it's not every time that something bad comes out of an awkward photo moment. In 2016, for example, King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia caused a minor sensation when he and his brother, Crown Prince Sultan, were photographed with women without their faces covered.

They would have been pleased to pay a million riyal to plug a leak or scrub it if they had known beforehand. The ticking photo-bomb was released only for a government official to defuse it the next day by simply saying the photo showed that: "It was OK to work with women!"

DOES IT MATTER?

Back to the question: why do people manipulate photos? Studies have suggested a number of reasons. A study by BMC Psychology last April suggested that reasons for image-manipulation or photoshopping are rooted in self-objectification where individuals involved are keenly aware of, even sometimes obsessed by, their physical looks, which tends to affect everything, including their sense of self-esteem.

The higher the investment in social media, the higher the tendency to use tools, including photoshop and other

image-filtering apps, to look incredibly, yet quite often, deceptively, good. But that's the modern playground, the place where billions work and move and define their being.

The domain is not limited to royalty. Obsession to twist, scrub and bend things from their essence as sacrifice on the altar of the post-modern self is just as widespread in royalty as it is in fashion, journalism, marketing and politics. And the realm is getting larger and larger because increasingly the only thing that matters, that is rewarded and celebrated, is success. Everything else is judged harshly.

THE ART OF IT

There is of course also the ethical question of boundaries. While there are those who argue that image-alteration is a form of art which has produced such geniuses as Erik Johansson or Rosie Hardy, for example, there are others who take the view – and I agree – that unethical retouching can contribute to body image issues, especially among young people, fostering feelings of inadequacy and insecurity.

To encourage authenticity and hopefully slowly create a society where people are not ashamed – or afraid – to be who they are, perhaps we need to be less severe and more forgiving and transparent when we scrub those images. And yes, we must also learn to take ourselves a lot less seriously.

Ishiekwene is editor-in-chief of Leadership

FG, states' public debts surge to N97trn in 2023

● **as debt service gulps \$3.5bn**

Nigeria's total public debt, comprising both local and foreign debts, increased by 11.4 percent to N97.1 trillion in December 2023, an indication of the country's high appetite for debts, when compared with N87.4 trillion as of June 2023,

implying that the Federal Government, states and FCT added new N9.96 trillion debts in the second half of 2023.

Nigeria's total external debt stood at N38.22 trillion as of December 2023, comprising FG's N34.07 trillion, and N4.15 trillion owed by the 36 states

and FCT. The FG's external debt, based on the data released by the Debt Management Office (DMO), amounted to N34.07 trillion as of December 2023, representing an increase of 14

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IFC, partners inject \$1.25bn into Indorama Eleme Fertilizer

The International Finance Corporation, in collaboration with its partners, announced it has injected the sum of \$1.25 billion in Indorama Eleme Fertilizer and Chemicals Company in Nigeria.

"The investment will allow Indorama to ramp up its fertilizer production and develop a port terminal for exports, supporting food production and

food security across regional and international markets, while fostering job creation in Nigeria," IFC announced last week.

The international development finance institution added that "The financing package will fund Indorama's plans to develop a third nitrogenous urea fertilizer production line and a new shipping terminal at its operations in Port Harcourt. The

new production line is expected to have an annual capacity of 1.4 million metric tons of urea, one of the most widely used fertilizers worldwide."

Other lenders that contributed to the financing include the African Development Bank (AfDB), Bangkok Bank,

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The Nigerian Observer

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Stakeholders favour new rate hike as CBN's MPC convenes March 25

STORIES BY: TELIAT SULE

Economic analysts from leading investment and research firms in the country are favouring a new rate hike by the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) as it convenes for the 294th MPC meeting at the nation's capital, Abuja. The meeting begins today and ends to-

morrow, March 26, 2024.

The analysts' projections are anchored on the rising inflationary trend, exchange rate volatility and its pass-through effect on prices of goods and services in Nigeria.

"Given the urgency of addressing inflation, the MPC is expected to prioritize policies aimed at curbing it. An increase in the Monetary Policy Rate (MPR) by 200bps to 24.75% is

anticipated. While a rate hike is likely, the MPC might choose to maintain other policy parameters, such as the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR)," Meristem Securities, said in a note to investors.

Meristem Securities added that such a decision would reflect a cautious approach towards managing system liquidity while prioritizing naira stability as the CBN sets its eyes on increasing FPIs to further sup-

port the exchange rate stability.

It should be recalled that at the last MPC meeting held between February 26th and 27th 2023, the committee raised further the benchmark interest rate, the Monetary Policy Rate (MPR), to 22.75 percent from 18.75 percent, amounting to an increase of 400 basis points. It also raised the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) to 45 percent from 32.5 percent, maintained the liquidity ratio at

30 percent while the asymmetric corridor around the MPR was left at +100/-700 basis points from +100/-300 basis points.

"As the MPC meets next week, we expect them to raise interest rates by 100-150 basis points. Maintaining the status quo or cutting rates are not viable options on the table," Financial Derivatives Company (FDC) said.

Afrinvest says it foresees a

rate hike of about 100-200 basis points but recommends that the best decision to take now in view of the last rate hike is to retain the existing rates.

"We anticipate between 100-200 bps rate hike next week. That said, we recommend a hold decision as a more appropriate path considering the strong interest rate hike less than a month ago," Afrinvest said.

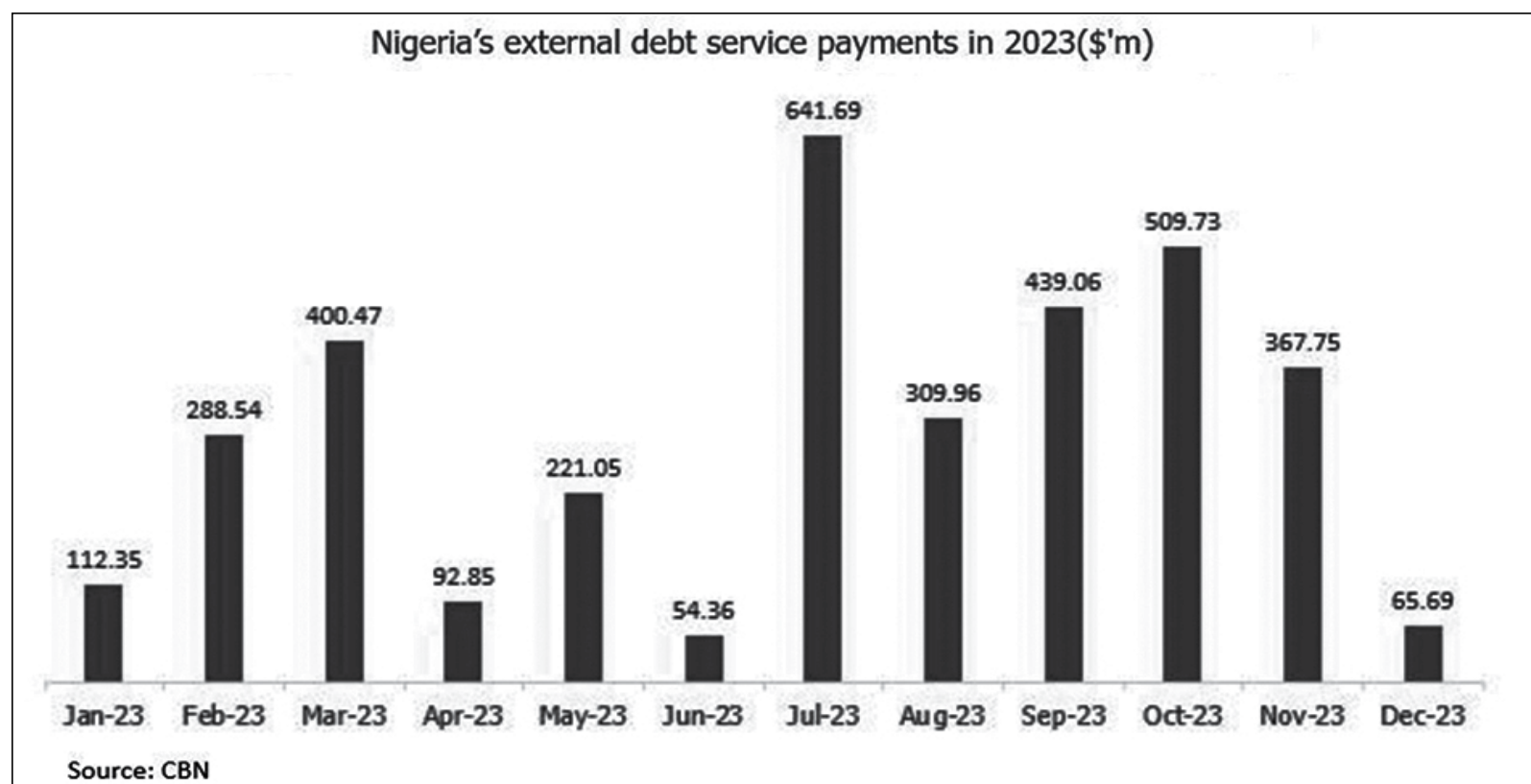
Notwithstanding the hawkish stance of the CBN, both the headline and food inflation continued to soar, reaching new highs in February 2024. According to the nation's data agency, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), headline inflation rose to 31.70 percent and food inflation jumped to 37.92 percent in February 2024.

One of the reasons the CBN took the hawkish stance in February was to address the surging inflation.

"The price stability mandate vested in the Central Bank necessitates making difficult decisions to steer the economy towards recovery. Given the imperative to curb inflationary pressures, which could pose social challenges and impede long-term growth prospects, I am persuaded that the MPC must adopt an assertive stance by tightening monetary policy measures," Olayemi Cardoso, CBN governor said in February.

Exchange rates of the naira

CONTINUES ON PG 12»



NCAA REASSURES TRAVELERS OF AIRFARE REDUCTION OVER RELEASE OF TRAPPED FUNDS

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FIDELITY BANK, LBS EMPOWER EXPORTERS AT 15TH TRAINING PROGRAMME

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NPC SET TO ENHANCE NIGERIA'S PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH TRAINING PROGRAMMES

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GOMBE, UNICEF LAUNCH N11BN AMBITIOUS PLAN TO COMBAT MALNUTRITION

—Pg 14

Business&Economy

The Nigerian
Observer
...that the people may know

NCAA reassures travelers of airfare reduction over release of trapped funds

HAPPY OSAGIE

In a promising development for air travelers, the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA) has reassured air travellers that fares are set to decrease in the coming days, attributing this positive development to the release of trapped funds owed to airlines as well as the agency's proactive engagement with industry stakeholders.

Michael Achimugu, Director of Public Affairs and Consumer Protection at the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA), shed light on the factors behind the anticipated drop in airfares, highlighting the pivotal role played by the release of trapped funds in facilitating airfare reduction. This move not only injected the much-needed liquidity into the

aviation sector but also enabled airlines to streamline their operations and potentially lower ticket prices for passengers.

Achimugu underscores the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaboration between the NCAA, airlines, and other relevant stakeholders, which fosters open communication and partnership, enabling the agency to address the challenges collectively and ensuring a sustainable and thriving aviation industry.

While interacting with The Nation, Achimugu revealed the agency's commitment to lowering airfares under the leadership of Minister of Aviation and Aerospace Development, Festus Keyamo, and Director General Capt. Chris Najomo.

He affirmed that the NCAA, in collaboration with Minister Keyamo and DG Najomo, is

dedicated to taking decisive measures to bring down airfares. This commitment underscores their shared vision of making air travel more affordable and accessible for passengers across Nigeria.

Achimugu said: "Globally, airfares are not regulated but the government can engage airlines to be reasonable about

their fares and that is what the NCAA under the leadership of Captain Chris Najomo based on the instruction of the minister, has shown great concern for consumer protection."

He added that the NCAA has formed a high-powered committee tasked with examining the feasibility of reducing airfares across board.

"We engaged the airlines and we have gotten the commitment of the majority of them to look into the reduction of fares," he added.

Achimugu emphasized that achieving a reduction in airfares is a collaborative endeavor involving the NCAA, the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Com-

mission (FCCPC), the National Association of Nigeria Travel Agencies (NANTA), and other relevant stakeholders. This multi-faceted approach underscores the commitment of both government bodies and industry players to address the challenges faced by air travelers and enhance affordability in the aviation sector.

Stakeholders favour new rate hike as...

«CONTINUED FROM PG 11

to other international currencies, especially the US dollar, have strengthened, partly due to the hike in interest rate, and the clearance of the FX backlogs which have helped in stabilizing the FX market in the near term.

It was reported that the CBN had cleared about \$7 billion FX backlog with the payment of arrears owed to foreign airlines and other stakeholders.

Further, and according to FMDQ Exchange, the naira closed at N1,431.49/\$ last week Friday March 22, an improvement on about N1600/\$ as of the last time the MPC held its inaugural meeting under the new

leadership at the CBN.

"The exchange rate is a key driver of inflation. The exchange rate pass-through in Nigeria is estimated at about 82%. Thus, a depreciation of the naira raises import costs, leading to higher domestic prices for imported products and potentially driving overall inflation," FDC stated in a note to investors.

The appreciation in FX rates is also attributed to the improvement in external reserves. Based on the CBN data on external reserves, Nigeria gained about \$800 million as the nation's external reserves from \$33.52 billion as of February 23, 2024 to \$34.26 billion on March 21, 2024.

FG, states' public debts surge to...

«CONTINUED FROM PG 11

percent over N29.89 trillion as of June 2023. The increase amounted to an increase of N4.18 trillion in six months.

States and FCT incurred N4.15 trillion as of December 2023 compared to N3.35 trillion as of June 2023, representing an increase of N795.71 billion during the same period. Both the FG and states' external debts amounted to 39.3 percent of Nigeria's total external debt.

FG and states' domestic debts constituted 60.7 percent of the nation's total public debt. FG owed N53.26 trillion while states and FCT owed N5.86 trillion. Compared with June 2023, FG owed N48.31 trillion while states and FCT owed N5.82 trillion.

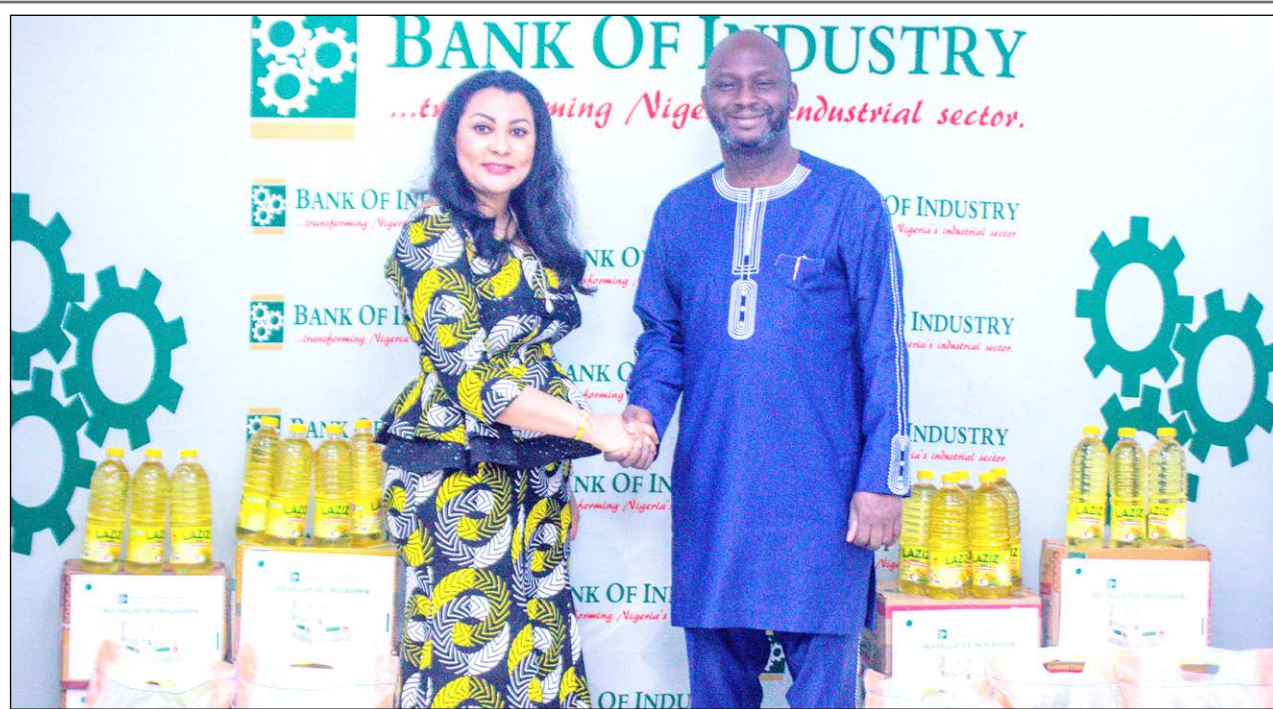
In the 2024 Appropriation Act, the FG made provisions for a total deficit of N7.83 trillion comprising new domestic borrowing of N6.06 trillion and new external borrowing of N1.77 trillion.

"The new domestic borrowing of N 1,767.61 6.06 trillion will be funded through the issuance

of FGN Securities: FGN bonds, Nigerian treasury bills, Sukuk, green bonds and FGN savings bonds. The new external borrowing of N 1.76 trillion will be funded mainly through the issuance of Eurobonds and new multilateral and bilateral loans, including Export Credit subject to market and availability, respectively," the Bank of Industry stated while presenting facts and figures on the 2024 appropriation act at the beginning of the year.

Meanwhile, data from the CBN and DMO showed that Nigeria spent \$3.50 billion on debt servicing in 2023. The spent gulped \$112.35 million on debt servicing in January 2023; \$288.54 million in February 2023; \$400.47 million in March 2023; \$92.85 million in April; \$221.05 million in May 2023, and \$54.36 million in June 2023.

Also, in July 2023 Nigeria spent \$641.69 million, \$309.96 million in August 2023; \$439.06 million September 2023, \$509.73 million in October 2023, \$367.75 million in November 2023, and \$65.69 million in December 2023.



NATIONAL PALLIATIVE FOOD PROGRAMME:

The Honourable Minister Of Industry, Trade and Investment, Dr. Doris Uzoka-Anite (L) and the MD/CEO, Bank Of Industry (BOI), Dr. Olasupo Olusi (R) during the launch of BoI's National Palliative Food Programme in Lagos.

CBN launches nationwide financial literacy campaigns

CHIDERA DUMBIRI

In commemoration of the Global Money Week 2024, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) has initiated an extensive financial literacy campaign targeted at secondary schools across the nation. With the theme "Protect your money, Secure your future," the CBN aims to equip students with essential money management skills crucial for their financial well-being.

Spanning the six geopolitical regions, the apex bank orchestrated a series of interactive sessions and workshops to instill a culture of financial responsibility among students. At the forefront of this campaign is the acting director of the consumer protec-

tion department at CBN, Othniel Nuhu, who highlighted the critical need for financial awareness among the youth.

Speaking at the Government Secondary School, Gwagwa in Abuja, Nuhu emphasized the significance of cultivating a positive attitude towards money encompassing earning, saving, and early investments. He addressed the students directly, stressing the importance of financial literacy despite not being in the workforce yet, stating that the initiative aims to "catch them young."

Nuhu drew a clear distinction between academic education and financial literacy, underlining the necessity for students to develop a habit of saving from a

young age. He further stressed the CBN's commitment to educating youth about money management, linking financial literacy to future wealth creation, income enhancement, and improved living standards.

During the 12th literacy fair organized by the CBN, Gbadamosi Lanre, head of the consumer education and evaluation division, expressed concerns about Nigeria's low financial literacy rate. He attributed this to inadequate awareness, low-income levels, and escalating poverty rates, prompting the CBN to establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for financial literacy initiatives.

Meanwhile, Abdullahi Musa Zakari, the principal of GSS

Gwagwa, expressed gratitude to the CBN for selecting their school for the awareness campaign. Zakari urged students to take the financial literacy programme seriously, recognizing its potential to shape their future both personally and professionally. He emphasized the importance of active participation during the training sessions, acknowledging the invaluable skills it could impact to students.

The CBN's nationwide financial literacy campaign signals an approach towards addressing financial challenges among Nigeria's youth, aiming to empower them with the knowledge and skills necessary for financial success and security in the years to come.

IFC, partners inject \$1.25bn into...

«CONTINUED FROM PG 11

British International Investment, Citibank, Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft (DEG), DZ Bank, Emerging Africa Infrastructure Fund (EAIF), Rand Merchant Bank, Nederlandse Financierings-Maatschappij voor Ontwikkelingslanden (FMO), Export-Import Bank of India (India Exim Bank), Export-Import Bank of Korea (KEXIM), the Standard Bank Group, Standard Chartered Bank, and

the United States International Development Finance Corporation (DFC).

Indorama Eleme Petrochemical Limited (IEPL), located in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, is a poly-olefins producer of a range of polyethylene and polypropylene products. Initially, IEPL was a 100% subsidiary of Nigerian government owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) with the name Eleme Petrochemicals Company Limited (EPCL). When the erstwhile EPCL was privatized, under the privatiza-

tion programme, the Indorama Corporation emerged as the core investor and acquired the Unit in August 2006.

"This financing demonstrates the strong collaboration and alignment of interests between the public and private sector to drive sustainable development and create value for all stakeholders. Indorama remains dedicated to playing a vital role in supporting global food security by ensuring consistent supply of high-quality fertilizers in Africa, and beyond, while contributing to Nigeria's broader economic

objectives," Amit Lohia, Group Vice Chairman, Indorama Corporation, said.

"Reliable access to high quality fertilizer is essential for food production and food security around the world. IFC's investment in Indorama, along with African, Asian, European, and American partners, signals our joint commitment to support the agriculture sector, Nigeria's economy, and the expansion of Indorama, an important supplier in the global food chain," Sérgio Pimenta, IFC Vice President for Africa, said.

Fidelity Bank, LBS empower exporters at 15th training programme

CHIDERA DUMBIRI

In a strategic partnership aimed at enhancing Nigeria's export capabilities, Fidelity Bank Plc, one of the leading

tier-two banks in the country, has collaborated with the Lagos Business School (LBS) in hosting the 15th edition of the Export Management Programme (EMP 15). The week-long train-

ing programme, held in Lagos, focused on equipping entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in the international market and contribute significantly to the

country's non-oil export sector.

Launched in 2016 and in collaboration with the Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC), the Export Management Programme has become

a cornerstone initiative in fostering a culture of effective export practices among Nigerian entrepreneurs. Emmanuel Nwalor, the team lead of the export and agriculture division at Fidelity Bank, emphasized the importance of empowering entrepreneurs to engage in value-added exports, particularly in the agriculture sector.

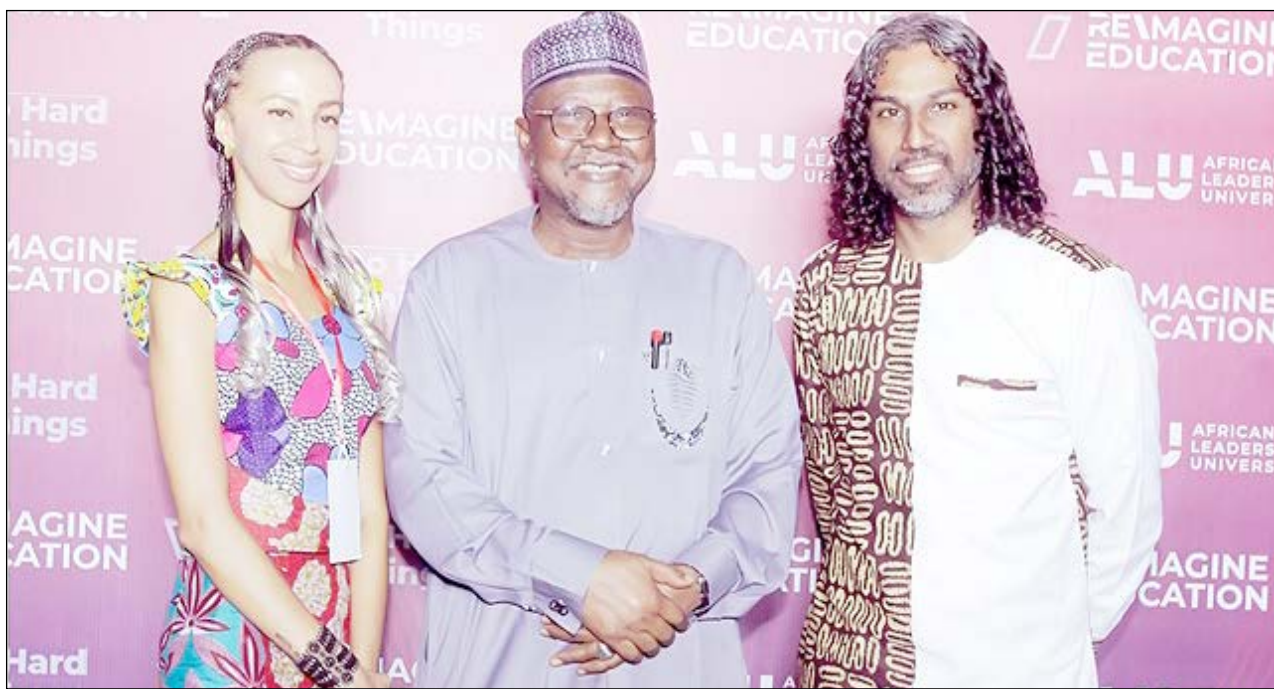
During the EMP 15 training, participants were exposed to best practices in exporting agricultural products, including cashew, cocoa, ginger, and other commodities abundant in Nigeria. Nwalor highlighted the significance of understanding packaging standards, product quality, and other essential parameters critical for successful exports.

Nwafor stated that at Fidelity Bank, the bank advocates for value-added export and has witnessed remarkable progress

in the manufacturing sector through the EMP initiative. Its partnership with LBS has enabled us to emphasize the importance of packaging, quality assurance, and comprehensive understanding of export processes.

Victor Banjo, the Director of Executive Education at LBS, commended the EMP as a crucial intervention that addresses key challenges facing Nigeria's export landscape. He acknowledged Fidelity Bank's role in developing and supporting initiatives like EMP, which are instrumental in building a competitive export ecosystem in Nigeria.

The EMP 15 training program reflects a strong effort by Fidelity Bank, LBS, and NEPC to empower Nigerian entrepreneurs, enhance export capabilities, and contribute positively to the country's economic expansion agenda.



EDUCATION CONFERENCE:

Kayta Nyangi, Director of Marketing, Strategy and Outreach at African Leadership University (ALU); Senator Garba Musa Maidoki, Kebbi South Senatorial District; and Mr. Veda Sunassee, CEO of ALU; at the African Leadership University's Reimagine Education Conference in Lagos.

Nigeria partners UN to harness marine resources

GOODNESS OYEDUN

The Federal Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy has announced a groundbreaking partnership with the United Nations (UN) aimed at harnessing the potential of Nigeria's marine resources. The collaboration will focus on research, technology development, fishery, biodiversity, renewable energy, and other key aspects of the marine and blue economy ecosystem.

During a meeting held in Abuja, Adegboyega Oyetola, the Minister of Marine and Blue Economy, expressed enthusiasm for the partnership, stating, "We would be happy to partner with the UN in the area of research,

development of technology, fishery, biodiversity, renewable energy, and other areas that make up the totality of the marine and blue economy ecosystem."

The minister emphasized the importance of sustainable use of ocean resources in promoting economic growth, improving livelihoods, creating job opportunities, and preserving the ecosystem. This collaboration is expected to have a significant impact on the livelihoods of Nigerians, as well as contribute to the overall development of the country.

Highlighting Nigeria's commitment to maritime safety and security, Minister Oyetola also revealed that the country has achieved an impressive mile-

stone of zero incidents of piracy for three consecutive years. The Ministry will continue its efforts to ensure the safety and security of Nigeria's waters, further bolstering the nation's reputation as a safe maritime destination.

This partnership between the Federal Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy and the United Nations marks a major step towards sustainable development and the efficient utilisation of Nigeria's marine resources. With a shared vision for progress, the collaboration holds great promise for the future of the marine and blue economy in Nigeria, driving economic growth, job creation, and the preservation of the marine ecosystem.

Minister Oyetola highlight-

ed the importance of training seafarers, recognizing that there is still work to be done in this region. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's establishment of the Federal Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy demonstrates Nigeria's commitment to creating a safer environment, generating employment opportunities, and revitalising the economy.

The new UN Resident Coordinator, Mohamed Malick, congratulated Nigerians on this significant milestone. He commended Nigeria's resolve to contribute to a safer environment, provide employment for the younger generation, and drive economic development through the proper utilization of marine resources.

Adelabu spotlights customer service to boost power sector's productivity

GOODNESS OYEDUN

Minister of Power, Adebayo Adelabu, has emphasised the crucial role of Distribution Companies (DisCos) in delivering exceptional customer service, noting that this is essential for proactive engagement and efficient operations to effectively meet consumer demands.

Addressing challenges such as metering, vandalism, debt collection, and customer relations, Adelabu stressed the importance of extensive changes and transformation in every part of the power sector. He emphasised the critical need to stimulate demand through

active customer interactions and ensure the efficient use of generated power.

The minister also confirmed the government's commitment to enhancing the sector's performance through substantial investments in infrastructure and efficient customer response. In line with this, Adelabu announced the Federal Government's strategy to escalate electricity generation capacity from 3,500 megawatts to 6,500 megawatts within the next three to six months. This ambitious plan aims to improve power supply nationwide and satisfy the increasing energy needs of the country.

During his visit, Adelabu in-

spected the Eko Electricity Distribution Company (EKEDC) headquarters and visited two 20 MVA injection substations at Randle, Surulere, including their Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) monitoring facilities.

EKEDC chairman, Oritsedere Otubu, expressed appreciation for the government's efforts in enhancing power supply. He assured their full support for this initiative. Dr. Tinuade Sanda, EKEDC CEO, emphasised the company's commitment to working together with government agencies and consumers to safeguard power assets and combat vandalism.

"To ensure a stable power supply, EKEDC invested over N4 billion in transformers, cables, and the rehabilitation of 352 feeders. This investment will be particularly beneficial during the rainy season. However, the company faces a debt profile of over N131 billion, including outstanding debts from Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs)," Dr. Sanda said.

She also appealed to customers to pay their bills promptly to ensure effective service delivery. She highlighted that MDAs' outstanding debts alone amount to over N36 billion. As a result, the DisCo may consider mass disconnection for debtors.

Nigeria procures 500 tractors to boost food production, security

NAOMI EWANSIHA

The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security under the leadership of Senator Abubakar Kyari, has unveiled an initiative to revolutionise farming practices across Nigeria. In a bid to promote mechanized agriculture, increase food production, and bolster food security, the ministry has announced the acquisition of 500 tractors from the renowned John Deere Group.

Senator Kyari, during a recent media briefing, outlined the ambitious plan, which aims to distribute 2,000 subsidized tractors annually over the next five years to farmers nationwide. This initiative comes in direct response to President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's urgent call to action on food security.

The first batch of 500 tractors is expected to be delivered by the end of May, with the remaining units scheduled to arrive by September 2024. Minister Kyari expressed confidence in John Deere's capacity to meet the delivery targets outlined in the memorandum of understanding with the ministry.

In addition to the tractor acquisition, the ministry has secured 58,500 tonnes of milled rice from the Rice Millers Association of Nigeria to stabilize market prices and mitigate food price inflation. The government's proactive stance aims to ensure that the agricultural sector remains resilient amidst market fluctuations.

Furthermore, the Central Bank of Nigeria's allocation of 2.15 million bags of assorted fertilizers, valued at over N100 billion, highlights the government's commitment to enhanc-

ing agricultural productivity. Minister Kyari emphasized the importance of judiciously distributing these fertilizers to farmers across the country to maximize their impact.

"We will swing into action as soon as we receive the locations, which I am sure are spread across the country," Kyari stated.

By investing in mechanized agriculture and acquiring 500 tractors from the reputable John Deere Group, the government is poised to revolutionize farming practices and increase food production across the nation. The commitment to distribute 2,000 subsidized tractors annually for the next five years highlights a long-term strategy to empower farmers and stimulate agricultural activities.

Additionally, the procurement of 58,500 tonnes of milled rice and the allocation of 2.15 million bags of assorted fertilizers by the Central Bank of Nigeria reflect proactive measures to stabilize market prices and enhance agricultural productivity. This initiative not only addresses immediate challenges but also lays the groundwork for a resilient and sustainable agricultural sector that can effectively navigate market fluctuations and ensure food security for all Nigerians.

The unveiling of this comprehensive agricultural mechanization programme signals a significant milestone in Nigeria's journey towards achieving food and nutritional security. With a steadfast commitment to accessibility, availability, and affordability, the government is poised to empower farmers of all scales to thrive in the modern agricultural landscape.

Business & Economy

The Nigerian
Observer
...that the people may know

NPC set to enhance Nigeria's productivity through training programmes

OLUTOLA FAWEHINMI AND
NAOMI EWANSIHA

The National Productivity Centre (NPC), recognized as the apex institution for promoting productivity in Nigeria, is set to embark on a transformative journey under the leadership of its newly appointed Director-General, Dr. Nasir Raji-Mustapha.

With a rich history of demystifying productivity, the centre aims to align its initiatives with the national socio-economic context and development needs, translating productivity concepts into actionable strategies.

Over the years, the NPC has played a multifaceted role as a capability builder, catalyst, mobilizer, information disseminator, networker, initiator, and pioneer of specific productivity improvement programmes and policy analyses. Through its extensive network of about 20 Local Productivity Councils and 19 State Offices across major capitals, the centre provides technical support to enhance productivity at both the grassroots and national levels. Additionally, the NPC supports and mentors hundreds of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) across the country, focusing on training to improve productivity, quality, and profitability.

Dr. Nasir Raji-Mustapha, a seasoned productivity practitioner with a diverse academic background, recently assumed the role of Director-General of the NPC. During a recent interview, Dr. Raji-Mustapha outlined his three-point agenda, which prioritizes staff welfare, staff training, and aggressive deployment of productivity tools and techniques.

Reflecting on his appointment, Dr. Raji-Mustapha expressed a sense of mixed feelings, acknowledging both the challenges ahead and the opportunity to demonstrate his capabilities. With extensive training by the Nigerian government and international bodies like the Asian Productivity Organization, Dr. Raji-Mustapha is well-equipped

to lead the centre towards achieving its goals and contributing to national development.

"Well, you know I've been in the system, and so I know the challenges. So, when it happened, it was that of mixed feelings, because I know what's on ground to be done. But, I'm glad also that God has given me the opportunity to show what I can do as a productivity practitioner, who has been trained over time by the Federal Government of Nigeria and other nations like the Asian Productivity Organization spearheaded by the Japanese government so I think I'm well trained enough to be able to deliver, and to also achieve our common desire and goal for the Centre and for the nation," Raji-Mustapha said.

Addressing the centre's alignment with the Overall Economic Reform Roadmap of the present administration, Dr. Raji-Mustapha made known the critical role of productivity in driving sustainable and inclusive growth. He highlighted the importance of capacity building, welfare enhancement, and the aggressive deployment of productivity schemes to support the government's ambitious targets, including doubling the economy, reducing poverty, and creating millions of jobs.

"As you are aware, when I came on board, I told my staff and the whole world that in the next few years, what I will concentrate on or focus on are capacity building of my staff, welfare of my staff, and aggressive deployment of productivity and quality improvement scheme for both the public and the private sectors.

"So, if you look at what productivity is all about, productivity does not come by accident. You have to work towards being a productive nation. And for us to achieve all the aspirations of this new government, as an agent of government, we know that as it happens in other productive nations of the world, it's only productivity that can get us there.

"This is because if you look at the drivers of the economy all over the world, the public and private sectors, especially the informal sector, is key to the growth

and development of any nation.

"And our desire is that since we have a programme that is called Productivity and Quality Improvement Tools for SMEs, and these tools are very effective all over the world, we deploy these tools in a strategic way so that a lot of companies and enterprises will benefit across our nation," Raji stated.

In response to concerns about the Orosanye's report for MDAs' restructuring which has resurfaced, Dr. Raji-Mustapha spoke on how they go beyond productivity trainings but also conduct productivity researches, evaluate the levels and trends of productivity in various sectors of the economy in a bid to continuously deliver effectively. Also, he

talked about sensitization programmes in schools so that the young can have this productive attitudinal mindset in them.

"So, I always assure my staff that the most important thing is for us to continue to train ourselves more so that we'll be able to deliver as required by us in our mandate and I want to state clearly that the National Productivity Center is not just an ordinary training institution. We do much more than productivity training; we conduct productivity research, evaluate the levels and trends of productivity in various sectors of the economy.

"And apart from the research, we also try to coach and mentor the youths of this nation with our productivity

clubs in schools and sensitization programmes that we do for youths, trying to catch them up when they are young so that by the time they grow up that productive attitudinal mindset would have also been imbibed in them," he said.

Regarding the centre's strategic plan, Dr. Raji-Mustapha reaffirmed its relevance to the government's economic roadmap, while emphasising the need for effective implementation of the plan to achieve the centre's objectives and support national development priorities.

He said it is the plan of the NPC to reach all the states of the federation, which is to be achieved through the establishment of state offices to facilitate

programme deployment and engagement with stakeholders at the grassroots level.

He stated there are ongoing efforts to recruit retired consultants and enhance staff capabilities to deliver productivity improvement programmes effectively.

"Yes, my predecessor has done a lot in productivity promotion and advocacy. But we also need to do more in the area of deployment of our productivity tools and techniques and trainings too. That is why I want to enhance the capacity of my staff first, improve their welfare, enhance their capacity to be able to deliver to the public, because you cannot give what you don't have," Dr. Raji Mustapha said.



SEND FORTH:

Former governor of Rivers State, Dr. Peter Odili (middle); his wife, Justice Mary JSC (rtd) (6th right), and others at the send forth organised in honour of Justice Odili by the Body of Benchers in Abuja.

Gombe, UNICEF launch N11bn ambitious plan to combat malnutrition

NAOMI EWANSIHA

The Gombe State Government, in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has unveiled a comprehensive four-year Multi-Sectoral Strategic Plan of Action on Food and Nutrition (GMSPAFN) in a collaborative effort to tackle the alarming rates of malnutrition and hunger among children and women.

The GMSPAFN, spanning from 2023 to 2027, has been projected to cost N11 billion, aiming to address the pressing issue of malnutrition that affects over 50 percent of children and women in Gombe State. This malaise significantly contributes to high rates of stunting, wasting, and anemia among the populace.

Speaking at the launch event held in Gombe, the Chief of the Bauchi Field Office, Tushar Rane, emphasized the critical

need for Gombe State to commit to eradicating malnutrition within its borders. Rane highlighted the significance of the plan, stating that it would guide the state in addressing food and nutrition security challenges at all levels, from individuals and households to communities, local governments, and the state itself.

"The Costed Multi-Sectoral Strategic Plan will promote diets, services, and practices that support optimal nutritional growth and development for all children, adolescents, and women. The plan estimates that interventions across the state will require a public investment of N11,169,423,741.16, with an average yearly public investment of N2,792,355,935 over the next four years (2023-2027)," Rane explained.

Furthermore, Rane announced Gombe State's commitment of N50 million as a counterpart contribution to the

Child Nutrition Fund, aimed at addressing all forms of malnutrition. The state government also unveiled a state policy on food and nutrition alongside the Multi-Sectoral Strategic Plan of Action, with a primary focus on vulnerable groups including women, children, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The plan, supported by UNICEF, aims to ensure access to nutrition for these vulnerable populations and to address deficiencies associated with malnutrition.

Government officials and UNICEF representatives provided additional insights into the four-year plan, emphasizing its targeted approach to addressing malnutrition issues, particularly in rural areas. With the launch of this novel nutrition plan, Gombe State joins other states and the Federal Government in establishing a framework for the nutrition of children, mothers, IDPs, and all residents of the state.

This concerted effort marks

a significant step forward in the fight against malnutrition, demonstrating the commitment of both the state government and international partners to improve the well-being of the people of Gombe.

The unveiling of the four-year Multi-Sectoral Strategic Plan of Action on Food and Nutrition (GMSPAFN) holds profound implications for the well-being of the population, particularly children and women.

With over 50 percent of children and women in Gombe State affected by malnutrition, the initiative comes as a critical response to address the pressing issue of stunting, wasting, and anemia prevalent among the populace. By promoting diets, services, and practices conducive to optimal nutritional growth and development, the plan aims to improve the overall health and well-being of children, adolescents, and women across the state.

Lafarge Africa Plc to commission evacuation corridor road Calabar

PATRICK ABANG, CALABAR

Lafarge Holcim Africa Plc is to commission a 20km Road from Mfarmosing to Odukpani junction by Governor Bassey Edet Otu. The concrete road that has lasted for over ten years was initiated during the Lijel Imoke administration by the cement giant.

Ginika Frank Durugbor, head of corporate communications at Lafarge Holcim Africa Plc, disclosed this to journalists in Calabar during an interactive session.

In addition, she said over 9,000 people are to bene-

fit from ICT by the host community. Also, Lafarge Holcim Africa PLC is empowering women especially in the host community.

He said for over 5 years, more than 4000 students have benefited from their Corporate Social Responsibility programme. Ten host communities have so far benefited from Lafarge Holcim Africa Plc.

Lafarge Holcim Africa Plc remains global leader in sustainable building solutions actually working the talk. The firm is committed to making cities greener and providing sustainable solutions.

ThePolity

• Policy • Legislation • Enforcement

Lawmakers, budget padding and allied matters

TOBORE JEROME AND
VICTORY OKONJO

When Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1999, one of those elected into the Senate was a retired Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG). In an interview, the retired AIG stated that among those sitting with him in the Senate were people he had investigated and locked up for various criminal offences when he was in service. He said some of them were rogues who were unfit for decent societies, let alone leadership positions. That senator was suspended. He was suspended for bringing the Senate to “disrepute”. Citizens did not protest.

After spending months at home without salaries and allowances, he had to apologize to the Senate and promised to be of good behaviour. That was in 1999.

In 2016, a member of the House of Representatives, Hon Abdumumunin Jubrin, raised the alarm that the nation's budget was padded. He went from the Police to the DSS. He went from radio stations to television houses. With proofs. No security agency acted or gave him attention. He was alone. He was also suspended. Then President Buhari, who was still wearing the borrowed robe of a saint, pretended to see and hear nothing. Citizens did not protest.

Budget padding is a euphemism for unlawful, criminal tampering and inflating of budget. It is a situation in which a budget is made bigger than the original estimates through an increase in the value of items or the introduction of new items into the budget. It is sometimes used in budgets in the private sector or by businesses when submitting a budget proposal for consideration. This is done to give the project room to expand or cover unexpected costs.

But it has found its way into public budgets through the inclusion of additional projects beyond what was originally submitted. The motive in most cases is corruption, but sometimes it could be genuinely done to assist a ministry in meeting fresh challenges that occurred after the submission of the original budget.

NINGI, THE SENATE, AND 2024 BUDGET

Recently, the Nigerian Senate has been embroiled in budget padding quagmire following an allegation by Senator representing Bauchi Central, Abdul Ningi. In an interview with BBC Hausa, Ningi raised an alarm of over N3 trillion budget padding in the N28.7 trillion 2024 Appropriation Act. He said that the budget passed by the National Assembly for the 2024 fiscal year was N25 trillion while the one being implemented by the Presidency is N28.7 trillion.

In the wake of this, the Senate suspended Ningi for three months. The resolution to suspend Ningi followed a motion by the Chairman, Senate Committee on Appropriations, Senator Olamilekan Adeola (APC, Ogun West), which prompted a closer examination of Ningi's statements, including a reading of the transcript



AKPABIO



NINGI

from his interview with Hausa BBC.

REACTIONS TRAIL ALLEGATION, NINGI'S SUSPENSION

Speaking with The Nigerian Observer, a seasoned legal practitioner, A. S. Adesheila, said budget padding often results in misallocation of scarce resources, wastefulness, and, ultimately, corruption.

“This act is fraudulent, and the perpetrators are fraudsters who must be prosecuted,” he said.

The lawyer questioned the press statement issued by the Special Adviser to the President on Information and Strategy, Bayo Onanuga, wherein he stated that Senator Ningi's allegations are completely untrue. He quoted Onanuga as saying, “The National Assembly, exercising its power of appropriation, increased the proposed budget to N28.7 trillion before passing it into law. President Tinubu then signed the revised version of the budget into law on January 1, 2024.”

Adesheila said by the above statement, Bayo Onanuga had already admitted “that the budget was indeed increased by the Nation Assembly, but he claims that it is within their constitutional powers without citing the sections of the Constitution that gives such power”.

“From the definition of the phrases ‘budget padding and budget appropriation’, it would be correct to submit that it is obvious that the Presidency does not truly understand the meaning of budget appropriation, or perhaps they are trying to shy away from the ordinary meaning of the phrase. Do we have another definition for the phrases in our country's vocabulary? Because the last time I checked, it was an English phrase,” Adesheila said.

“According to the special adviser, ‘The National Assembly, in its wisdom, increased the amount proposed by the

Executive by N1.2 trillion’. It is ridiculous how some political appointees come on air without any respect for the citizenry of this great nation and look into our faces, thereby calling us fools.

“The primary consequence of these grievous allegations to our already strained economy is to exacerbate the inflation we are currently experiencing, spurred by demand-pull, as it injects additional funds into the public sphere without a commensurate increase in goods and services. This can result in impractical forecasts and targets due to inflated figures. Consequently, numerous projects may exist solely on paper for extended periods or may be abandoned altogether. Moreover, it fosters a climate of compromise or blatant corruption, with instances emerging where ministers engage in bargaining with legislators to secure budget approval,” he said.

He described as disheartening the comment of the Senate President that “claims of budget padding made by Senator Abdul representing Bauchi

Central have put the integrity of the red chamber at risk”.

“With all due respect to the Senate President, we, the ordinary Nigerians, are aware that the Senate chamber has no integrity. It was also stated by the Senate President that ‘many Nigerians will never in future come back to respect this chamber’. Mr. Senate President Sir, not in the future, currently and presently we don't have respect for your chamber,” Adesheila said.

“Upon the allegations raised by the Senator, who is now reportedly suspended for three months, I cannot help but wonder how the Senate President is still presiding over the house, the same man who raised allegations of 30 billion naira distribution given to each state governor, later came back to apologize. His action alone was enough to set the nation ablaze, wherein citizens would have feasted on their respective governors, the same man has just, in conjunction with his chamber, suspended Senator Abdul after the special adviser to the president had accepted that the budget

was actually increased by the National Assembly.

“This is a country where different measures of punishment are passed down depending on the masquerade you parade,” he said.

Co-founder and CEO of BudgIT, Seun Onigbinde, threw his weight behind Ningi's claims that over N3 trillion was allocated in the 2024 budget without details or expenditure items for the allocation was provided.

Onigbinde, who featured as a guest on Channels Television's Politics Today programme, said as the rowdy session by the Senate was ongoing, the BudgIT team fact-checked claims by Ningi.

“There should be a detailed breakdown of the budget. On that point, Ningi is right. But to say that we are running two parallel budgets, I don't think that is factual,” Onigbinde said.

While acknowledging the absence of a breakdown for approximately N3.7 trillion in statutory transfers, Onigbinde, however, said this practice was not uncommon historically.

“If Senator Ningi says there is a N25trn budget, yes, that is the MDAs' budget. It's different from the government-owned enterprises' budget. In the current budget, the National Assembly gave a very broad summary of its allocations but there are no detailed allocations on a granular level that everybody can understand. TETFUND should not just get an allocation. What are you spending money on? INEC is collecting a huge chunk of funds but there is no public details about what the funds are used for,” Onigbinde said.

“If you put all these together, that is around N3.5 trillion to N3.7 trillion. So, if Ningi wants to interrogate that there are components of the budget where there is no breakdown, that is very factual.

“The Ministry of Agriculture is the biggest culprit of this. The executive proposed N363 billion for the Ministry of Agriculture budget. It came out to be N993 billion, over N600 billion worth of thousands of projects were put in,” he said.

Similarly, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), condemned Ningi's suspension, noting with regret that rather than suspending the senator, the red chamber should have allowed an independent investigation into the matter.

The pan-Northern organisation, in a statement in Kaduna by its National Publicity Secretary, Prof. Tukur Baba, said the process which culminated in Ningi's suspension appeared rushed, “looking more on the messenger rather than his message”.

The Forum further stated that with the suspension of Ningi, who had served as the leader of the Northern Senators' Forum, the interests of many communities in the region are at stake.

Meanwhile, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) urged Senate President Godswill Akpabio “to immediately reinstate whistleblower Abdul Ningi who

CONTINUES ON PG 16»

Nigeria: A blessed country with hungry, frustrated and depressed citizens

AHUSEMERE OGBEIDE

Nigeria is a blessed nation in terms of human and natural resources. Yet, it has been ravaged by systemic corruption and bad leadership, leading to a near collapse of the economy, which has given birth to hunger, frustration, depression and suicidal tendencies in some Nigerians who have lost hope in the renewed hope of the President Bola Amed Tinubu administration.

Life has become tough under President Tinubu's Government as his leadership style has become questionable. His policies are unfriendly and not people-oriented, bringing untold hardship to Nigerians who find life more challenging. No renewed hope in sight as the country is experiencing its worst crisis ever.

The government that campaigned with the slogan "renewed hope" during the presidential election in 2023 has allegedly lost touch with hope and brought hopelessness upon Nigerians whose expectations are now being cut short. They are struggling with hyperinflation as food, goods, services, and other essentials are rising exponentially daily.

Unfortunately, the President's speech on May 29, 2023, which ought to have been full of hope to a battered nation in dire need of assistance, instead brought hopelessness with the pronouncement of the removal of fuel subsidies. This exacerbated the already deteriorated situation left by President Muhammad Buhari's administration, and today, Nigerians are all suffering as that move by the President has brought confusion and hopelessness to the Nigerian people.

The lack of planning, assessment, and study of the fuel subsidy regime before the announcement of the removal has shown that the APC was never prepared to lead the people and lacked the leadership potential to transform Nigeria into a great nation. However, APC, now in power, appears more confused as the living conditions of the Nigerian people continue to deteriorate.

Removing fuel subsidies and floating the naira without well-thought-out plans or programmes has led to an unprecedented fall in the country's

economy. Hence, hardship, hunger, depression, and frustration are ravaging Nigeria, with the citizens hopeless and hapless without any solution in sight.

President Tinubu's government claimed that subsidy removal would free resources to develop critical sectors of the economy and provide social amenities that would improve Nigerians' living conditions and standards. The opposite is the case today, as hunger, frustration, and depression have become the order of the day. It claimed to be concerned about the welfare of suffering Nigerians, working hard to save money to develop critical projects that, in turn, would improve people's lives. However, rather than focus on the people, the President began to focus on himself and political colleagues by expanding government frivolous spending and financing the politicians' luxurious lifestyles.

The supplementary budget for 2023 and the expansion of the size of the government saw 46 ministers appointed, further worsening the situation for Nigerians. The nation is struggling with huge debts and an economic crisis due to poor policy formulation and implementation, a lack of transparency, and monumental corruption.

A government that cares and is sincere about developing the country must prioritize its plans instead of allocating about N160 million each to 469 lawmakers in the National Assembly for car purchases and budgeting more than N1.5 billion for the office of the First Lady, which is unknown to the Nigeria constitution, prioritizing the renovation of the Vice President's residence with the sum of N15 billion, including presidential yacht, and N3 billion for purchase of three more bulletproof Mercedes Benz S-Class 580 and supply of other vehicles to State House - all of which is going to be spent mainly chasing foreign goods, thereby further weakening the value of the naira.

The recent plea by the President that Nigerians should patronize made-in-Nigeria goods was lip service as charity begins at home. The President and his team should lead by example.

A country committed to cutting costs and providing resources for social and critical projects cannot afford to waste



TINUBU

scarce resources on foreign trips—from the UN General Assembly in New York to Germany-Berlin to India and the COP28 Dubai jamboree that saw 1,114 delegates from Nigeria, led by the President, and outrageous numbers to the Qatar business trips, including his family members, to canvas foreign investment.

The Tinubu government appears to have no regard or respect for public spending. More than N4 billion has been reportedly spent on foreign trips in less than a year of its inauguration. The government spends more time on foreign trips to convince foreign investors to come invest in Nigeria rather than working from home to build a conducive environment that is secure and business-friendly, devoid of corruption, followed by a sound justice system to boost investor confidence.

The Nigerian currency has witnessed unprecedented falls against significant currencies of the world since this administration came on board, which in turn further weakened the purchasing power of the citizens.

Today, Nigerians are no longer protesting for the improvement of their lives or social amenities but against hunger. In protests across the country, the story remains the same - all they want is to be able to feed themselves. These challenges have intensified the security threats in Nigeria. No region or part of the country that is not faced with insecurity threats as successive administrations have not been able to find an answer to this issue, including the Tinubu administration. The imbalance of social justice and years of deliberate neglect of our youths are some of the causes of the security challenges that this country is facing. And no socie-

ty or country can develop without peace and security.

The recent wanton killings across the country, including of our men in uniform in the Niger-Delta region, and abduction of school children from their schools, do not sound good to the ears. Many may wonder if the educational system will survive, as many families would now prefer to keep their wards out of school for fear they may be killed or kidnapped.

One would have thought that this government, which grapples with low acceptability, credibility and perception issues, would take serious steps to deal with the several problems that ravage the nation by living above board and deviating from the poor and corrupt leadership style of past administrations. Besides the low acceptance and credibility issues, the government's character and posturing make it clear that it is a waste of time to continue to believe that the APC campaign slogan "renewed hope" will deliver the actual economic development that the country desires.

To further worsen the situation and put Nigerians on a long, tortuous walk to the path of economic progress and prosperity, the opposition voices have been dampened and silent. At the same time, the Labour movement appears to have been compromised and weakened, and civil society organizations (CSOs) have been destroyed. Now, the people have been left with hopelessness.

As this administration prepares to mark its first anniversary in office, and if it truly desires to make progress and bring real development and economic prosperity, it should deliberately reduce the cost of governance, build strong institutions, improve power supply, empower the youth, create jobs, respect the rule of law, be financially disciplined, consult widely before the introduction of new policies and be coherent in policy formulation, courageous and transparent in the prosecution of anti-corruption war, encourage local production, respect dissenting voices, and empower civil society organizations. We are hoping that this "renewed hope" administration will retrace its steps and begin to correct the fundamental errors that heralded it.

Lawmakers, budget padding and allied matters

«CONTINUED FROM PG 15

was recently suspended from the Senate over his allegations that the lawmakers padded the 2024 budget by irregularly inserting projects worth N3.7 trillion.

SERAP urged the Senate President to "urgently refer the allegations that lawmakers padded the 2024 budget by irregularly inserting projects worth N3.7 trillion to appropriate anti-corruption agencies for investigation and prosecution".

The rights group also urged Akpabio "to make a public commitment to discontinue the patently unlawful constituency projects in the next budget cycle".

SERAP, in a letter dated 16 March 2024 and signed by its deputy director, Kolawole Oluwadare, said: "Referring these allegations to appropriate anti-corruption agencies would be consistent with the lawmakers' oath of office and the letter and spirit of the Nigerian

Constitution 1999 [as amended]."

SERAP said it would be grateful if the recommended measures are taken within seven days of the receipt and/or publication of the letter, otherwise it would consider appropriate legal actions "to compel you and the Senate to comply with our requests in the public interest".

"Encouraging whistleblowers to speak up improves public services and strengthens public accountability. Promptly referring the allegations to the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) for investigations and prosecution would serve the public interest," it said.

MATTERS ARISING

The allegations of budget padding have significantly undermined the credibility of the National Assembly in

the eyes of the public. With each accusation, the faith that citizens place in their legislative representatives to handle public funds responsibly wanes. There is a growing sentiment among the populace that the processes surrounding the allocation of these funds lack the necessary openness.

A bright spotlight has been cast by the unfolding scandal on the pressing need for the implementation of more robust oversight mechanisms within the National Assembly. It underscores the critical importance of establishing stringent checks and balances that are capable of curtailing any attempts at budget manipulation. Such mechanisms are not merely procedural formalities; they will be fundamental to ensuring the integrity of the budgeting process. By strengthening these oversight structures, the National Assembly can safeguard against the misuse of power and the misallocation of

public funds, thereby fostering a climate of accountability and trust in the legislative process.

Most importantly, it is imperative that this matter should not be treated as a case of mere financial irregularities, because it strikes at the very heart of democratic principles including but not limited to transparency, integrity and accountability. These values are foundational to a functioning democracy, where trust between the governed and their representatives is paramount. The allegations suggest a breach of this trust and call into question the commitment of the National Assembly to uphold these essential democratic standards. As stewards of public funds, the members of the National Assembly are entrusted with a significant responsibility to manage resources wisely and transparently, ensuring that every allocation serves the public interest.

The National Assembly has a crit-

ical opportunity to reaffirm its dedication to the citizens it serves. They have a chance to take decisive action that will restore faith in the legislative process and set a precedent for future governance. By addressing the controversy head-on, implementing stringent oversight, and committing to open and accountable practices, the National Assembly can demonstrate its resolve to foster a culture of integrity. Such steps would not only rectify current concerns but also strengthen the institution's credibility and the democratic fabric of the nation.

The National Assembly should as a matter of urgency jettison the idea of using appropriation of budgeting as a tool to indulge in budget padding. Also the security agencies must investigate all allegations of budget padding because it is a financial terrorism against the mass of the people in the interest of the privileged few.

INEC urges media vigilance against fake news ahead Edo, Ondo guber polls

CAROLINE AMEH

Ahead of the Edo and Ondo off-cycle elections coming up in September and November this year, respectively, the

Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof. Mahmood Yakubu, has rallied media stakeholders to bolster efforts in combating the proliferation of fake news and misinformation.

Speaking at the inaugural quarterly consultative meeting in Abuja on Thursday, Prof. Yakubu reiterated the crucial role of media organizations in ensuring the integrity and credibility of the electoral process.

Against the backdrop of heightened electoral activities, including recent bye-elections and re-run elections across several states, Prof. Yakubu underscored the need for enhanced collaboration between INEC and the media fraternity.

With the Edo State governorship election slated for September 21st, 2024, and the Ondo State governorship election following on November 16th, 2024, Prof. Yakubu provided insights into the preparatory measures underway, including the submission of candidate lists and personal particulars by political parties.

Recognizing the pervasive threat posed by fake news in the digital age, Prof. Yakubu urged media practitioners to exercise vigilance and accuracy in their reporting, particularly during the critical phases of

political party primaries.

He emphasized the significance of party primaries as integral components of the electoral process, calling upon journalists to scrutinize and report on these events with meticulous attention to detail, thereby fostering transparency and accountability.

In combating the spread of misinformation, Prof. Yakubu reaffirmed INEC's commitment to fostering greater openness and transparency in its operations. He commended the media for their role as

watchdogs of democracy and pledged continued collaboration with media stakeholders to uphold the integrity of Nigeria's electoral system.

The meeting concluded with a renewed commitment from both INEC and media organizations to work hand-in-hand in safeguarding the democratic process from the pernicious influence of fake news, ensuring that the upcoming governorship elections in Edo and Ondo States are conducted in a free, fair, and transparent manner.

PDP sets up screening committee in Ondo, set to screen aspirants

TOBORE JEROME

Ahead of the November 16 governorship election in Ondo State, the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the state has set up a screening committee to screen governorship aspirants.

This was disclosed in a press statement signed by the party's National Publicity Secretary, Debo Ologunagba, on Saturday in Abuja.

Ologunagba stated that the screening will take place on Wednesday March 27, 2024 at the NWC Hall PDP National Secretariat, Wadata Plaza, Abuja at 10 am prompt.

"The National Working Committee (NWC) of our great party, The People's Democratic Party (PDP) has setup the Ondo screening committee for the purpose of screening all the Governorship Aspirants for the upcoming Governorship primary election in Ondo State," Ologunagba said.

"The screening is scheduled as follows, Date: Wednesday March 27, 2024. Venue: NWC Hall PDP National Secretariat, Wadata Plaza, Abuja. Time: 10 am prompt.

"Members of the screening committee are, H.E. Sen. Dr Sam Egwu (Chairman), Sen Isa Shauibu Lau (Member), Chief Emmanuel Ogidi (Member), Barr. Mrs Olivia Dazyman (Member), Barr. Tanko Beji (Member), Amb. Mrs Gladys Ashemuke (Member), Chief Rahman Owokoniran (ZW-ZS) (Secretary), Caroline Akinsete (Administrative Secretary).

"All Governorship Aspirants, critical stakeholders, leaders and members of our Party in Ondo State are to take note and be guided accordingly," he said.

Meanwhile, PDP aspirants who purchased forms are former state deputy governor, Agboola Ajayi; Akinwumi Adeolu, Bamidele Akingboye Olusola Ebiseni, Kolade Akinjo, Bosun Arebuwa, and John Mafo.

Rivers crisis: Again, assembly overrides Fubara, enacts Service Commission Law

TOBORE JEROME

Rivers State House of Assembly has overruled Governor Siminalayi Fubara to enact the Rivers State House of Assembly (RSHA) Service Commission Law.

Members of the assembly on Friday convened an unscheduled sitting during which they observed that more than the constitutionally required 30 days had elapsed since they sent the notice of the amendment to the Rivers State House of Assembly Service Commission law to the governor for his assent.

This makes it the second time the Rivers State House of Assembly has overridden the gov-

ernor to pass a law this year.

In January, the lawmakers voted to override the governor and pass four bills into law. This was after the Speaker, Martin Amaewhule, read four letters addressed to him by the governor wherein he declined his assent to the four new bills which had been sent to him for assent.

The House had relied on Section 100, Subsection 5, to say that the assent of the governor was not required for the passage into law of the said bills.

The section stated that "where the Governor withholds assent and the bill is again passed by two-thirds majority, the bill shall become a law and the assent of the Governor shall not be required."

Kano governor sanctions officials over deficiencies in Ramadan feeding programme

RUTH ISIGBE

Kano State governor, Alhaji Abba Kabir Yusuf, has expressed dismay over the ongoing Ramadan Feeding Programme in the metropolis.

The governor decried the poor quality of the foods, the quantity and the unhygienic

cooking of the food.

A statement issued by Sanusi Bature Dawakin Tofa, the governor's spokesperson, on Friday, said the governor was disappointed with the programme during an impromptu visit to one of the feeding centres at Gidan Maza, Municipal Local Government Area.



ICCES MEETING:

L-R: Representative of IGP/Commissioner, Election Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Basil Ideagwu; INEC Chairman, Prof Mahmood Yakubu, and Representative of the National Security Adviser/Director, Internal Security, Hassan Abdullahi, at a meeting of the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES), held at the Conference Room, INEC Headquarters, Abuja.

PHOTO BY OMOYE AMINU.

Afamai youths endorse Ighodalo for governor

BLESSING IMAGBENIKARO

The Afamai Youth Movement has endorsed the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate in the Edo 2024 governorship election, Dr Asue Ighodalo.

The group, a vibrant youth-oriented organization in Etsako West dedicated to promoting and safeguarding the interests and mandates of Afamai grassroots voters, proudly affirmed its endorsement of Ighodalo at a well-attended

meeting on Saturday.

In a resounding show of unity and support, the President of the youth body, General Shake Musa, a.k.a Caesar, stated, "Afamai Youth Movement has unanimously declared its full backing for Dr Asue Ighodalo's aspiration with unwavering commitment and enthusiasm."

He reiterated the organization's willingness to support Ighodalo 100 per cent as he embarks on his journey towards the Edo State House in the September 2024 election.

ber 2024 election.

"AYM recognizes Dr. Asue Ighodalo's vision, leadership qualities, and dedication to serving the people of Edo State. His unwavering commitment to the state's progress and development aligns perfectly with our organization's values and aspirations," Musa said.

"As we stand united in our support for Dr Asue Ighodalo, we urge all members of the Afamai grassroots communities to join us in delivering the Edo

of our dreams by supporting his candidacy. Together, we can work towards a brighter future for our community under the leadership of Dr. Ighodalo and Osarodion Ogie Esq," he said.

Responding, Ighodalo expressed gratitude to the leadership of AYM and its members for their support of his aspiration. He assured them of his readiness to build not just the Edo of their dream but an Edo State that works for all and guarantees prosperity for all and sundry.

Obident movement withdraws support from Labour Party in Edo

TRACY FOLORUNSHO

Ahead of the September 11, 2024 governorship election in Edo State, a non-political body under the aegis of the Edo Obident Movement has withdrawn its support from the Labour Party and its candidate, Olumide Akpata.

The Edo Obident Movement reiterated that its involvement with LP during the 2023 general elections was massively based on its support for the party's presidential candidate, Peter Obi.

The movement emerged as

one of the many support groups for Obi during the last general elections, owing to his credentials and antecedents in public office. But today, the group is singing a different tune.

Addressing journalists at the NUJ Secretariat in Benin City, the Edo State capital, on Saturday, the group's spokesperson, Ikhuenbor Figo, insisted that LP has failed to impress as the alternative to the two main political parties in Nigeria.

It passed a vote of no confidence on the Edo LP primary election process, alleging that

the leaders, both at the national and state working committees, the local government areas, and ward executives are guilty in what it described as disgraceful and unpatriotic activities before, during and after the primary.

"We completely disassociate ourselves from the Labour Party and its candidate for the Edo 2024 governorship campaign, street rallies, and fitness walk," he said.

The Obident Movement also called on Obi to sanitize the leadership of the LP head of the

2027 presidential elections.

"While assuring His Excellency, Mister Peter Obi, of our continuous support for him, we advise that he provide leadership in the Labour Party and do a thorough review of the party leadership and purge themselves of all contaminating symptoms ahead of the 2027 general election," Figo said.

The group said it would unveil the political party and candidate the Obident Movement would be backing for the Edo governorship election in the coming weeks.

Technology

• ICT • Startups • Telecoms • Devcoms • Blockchain • Cloud

NIMC prompted to move on alleged data breach

BILL OKONEDO

The National Identity Management Commission has been alerted of a purported privacy breach involving unauthorised access to citizens' data via XpressVerify.com.

Pointing out the alleged breach, Paradigm Initiative, a civil society organisation said it should be dealt with immediately to forestall a violation of both the National Data Protection Act and citizens' constitutional right to privacy.

In a recent statement, Paradigm Initiative stressed the urgency of intervention from the NIMC and the Nigerian

Data Protection Commission to address the matter.

"The NDPC must swiftly investigate this matter, holding accountable all parties involved in compromising the security of the National Identity Database," it said.

"Every Nigerian has the right to trust that their personal information is secure and protected. We further demand NIMC outlines steps to rectify this breach and prevent future occurrences," the statement said.

Paradigm Initiative urges the NDPC to act decisively in upholding the principles of data protection and safeguarding citizens' privacy rights as

enshrined in the NDPA and the constitution, it said.

"All these demands are outlined in the freedom of information request sent by Paradigm Initiative, and we remain committed to collaborating with all involved agencies and relevant stakeholders to ensure the privacy rights of all are protected," it further added.

A report by the Foundation for Investigative Journalism on March

16 alleged that XpressVerify has unrestricted access to the NINs and personal details of all Nigerians registered in the nation's identity database managed by NIMC.

Furthermore, it suggested that XpressVerify has monetised this access to NINs and the personal information of citizens on the database.

Despite the allegations, NIMC, in a statement on Sun-

day, disclaimed any affiliation with XpressVerify.

The Director-General and CEO of NIMC, Abisoye Coker-Odusote, clarified that the commission solely provides NIN verification and other services through licensed partners.

Part of that statement read, "The Commission wishes to state that it offers NIN verification and other services through

licensed partners. However, XpressVerify is not one of the Commission's licensed partners.

"We express our gratitude to our media partners and the whistleblowers for bringing this to our attention and wish to assure Nigerians and legal residents that there is no data breach of any sort and the Citizens' data is safe and secure in Nigeria's National identity database."

Service restored on under-sea cable, telcos, NCC confirm

Contrary to the expectation that the undersea cable cut which disrupted banking and telecom services in Nigeria and some parts of Africa would last for about two weeks more, indications are that services are almost 100 percent back.

Telecom companies in Nigeria which mostly bore the brunt of the disruption confirmed that services were over 90 percent restored as engineers worked beyond schedules to ensure brisk recovery.

Chairman of the umbrella body of Nigerian telcos, Association of Licensed Telecom Operator in Nigeria, ALTON, Engr Gbenga Adebayo said whatever little disruptions experienced in the services of his members could only be as a result of backlog of congestions,

occasioned by the cut.

Adebayo said: "As we speak, service is almost fully restored. When the problem happened almost every operator re-routed to alternative platforms and the effect of the congestion is what subscribers could be experiencing now. We have invested heavily in service restoration and I can boast that we are almost out of the challenge in terms of service restoration" he added.

Confirming the position of the telcos, the regulator, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) also released a statement, through its Director Public Affairs, Mr Reuben Muoka, saying services have been restored to approximately 90 percent of peak utilisation capacity.

Apple in talks to bring Google's Gemini AI to iPhone

Apple is in advanced negotiations with Google to adopt its powerful Gemini AI models for the iPhone, Bloomberg reported on Monday.

The move, if confirmed and resulting in a deal, would answer one of the big questions about the iPhone-maker's AI strategy, which has been criticised as lagging behind its tech giant rivals.

Google's share price soared by well over six percent on the news. Apple's was up by as much as 2.5 percent.

According to Bloomberg, Apple is seeking to partner with Google for its next iOS operating system release and will likely feature on its next iPhone, expected later this year.

Apple and Google are already locked in a search engine partnership that sees Google pay Apple tens of billions of dollars every year to give the search engine a prominent place on the iPhone.

That long-running search engine deal is facing a historic lawsuit from the US Department of Justice for alleged violations of antitrust law.

Bloomberg reported that Apple had also held talks with OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, to partner on generative AI, without providing more details.

Apple CEO Tim Cook last month said there would be major updates in store on the AI front, though some observers may be disappointed that the company is teaming up with others to deliver on AI.

"For Google, any hypothetical deal with Apple could mean they essentially 'own' generative AI on mobile devices (Android + iOS)," said Colin Sebastian, an analyst at Baird.

"It also means Apple may not be in a position to catch-up to GenAI leaders, at least not in the next generation of devices," he added.



COURTESY VISIT:

Lagos State Commissioner for Tourism, Arts and Culture, Ms. Toke Benson-Awoyinka (2nd right); Special Adviser on Tourism, Arts and Culture, Mr Idris Aregbe (2nd left), while receiving in audience, the 'Little Mister (Bryan Chidera Ndukwe - middle) and Miss (Geraldine Mega - right) Africa Nigeria', and others on a courtesy visit to the ministry.

Tinubu seeks Meta's partnership to make Nigeria Africa's digital hub

UYIOSA ISAAC

President Bola Tinubu has proposed to tech firm, Meta, the parent body of Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram to grasp the opportunity of different channels the Federal Government has opened to partner Nigeria and transform it into Africa's technology hub.

Receiving a delegation of the social media firm in Aso Rock, Abuja during the week

President Tinubu told the team that his administration is sustaining investments in digital technology to enhance small businesses, expand opportunities across sectors as well as propel Nigeria to become the hub of Information and Communications Technology in Africa.

Sir Nick Clegg, former UK Deputy Prime Minister and Meta's President of Global Affairs who led the delegation, agreed

with the President that Nigeria cannot afford to be left behind in the technology race.

Clegg commended the president for an executive order he issued, which enabled the landing of the Meta-backed deep-sea cable in Nigeria.

Addressing the team, the president said: "We are serious with our 3MTT programme, which is training three million Nigerian youths in digital technology and essential skills before

deploying them to innovation hubs across the nation, because the Nigerian youths are the most critical asset in Nigeria's arsenal as it moves to achieve digital economic expansion.

"For us in Nigeria, we have a vibrant, gifted and resourceful youth population. Recognizing that the future is most likely to be AI-enabled, we have to prepare our youths and make them ready to compete and participate in the global economy."

Interswitch upscales 2,000 youths new technologies

NAOMI EMOVON

Integrated payments and digital commerce companies, Interswitch has commenced its maiden edition of Job Shadowing Programme to upskill 2,000 youths on emerging talents.

Interswitch said the move signals its dedication to nurturing emerging talent and enhancing capabilities within the continent's tech sector.

Franklin Ali, Chief Human Resources Officer, Interswitch Nigeria, said the programme which is scheduled to run from

March to June 2024, aims to empower over 2,000 professionals through immersive training, tailored coaching, and mentorship sessions spanning diverse disciplines such as engineering, product management, operations, marketing, finance, and human resources.

Ali said: "With over 16,000 applications received, the selection process rigorously sifted through candidates to identify the 2,000 successful intakes who would be further split into 20 cohorts. This immense interest underscores the high demand

for developmental opportunities within Africa's burgeoning tech sector.

"For three months, participants will immerse themselves in comprehensive training, gaining insights into industry best practices, emerging trends, and practical skills from Interswitch's seasoned professionals and tech industry experts alike.

"We are delighted to kick off the Interswitch Job Shadowing Program, tailored to empower the next generation of African talent. At Interswitch, we recognise the transformative power of

mentorship and hands-on learning in unlocking potential and driving innovation. Through this initiative, we aim to furnish professionals with the tools and support necessary to excel in their respective fields."

Ali also emphasised the programme's role in fortifying the technology value chain and enhancing workforce capabilities, asserting, "Initiatives like the Interswitch Job Shadowing Program play a pivotal role in nurturing talent and empowering individuals to thrive amidst the evolving workforce landscape."

GSM Village Benin City: Pushing the boundaries of commerce and technology

Mr. Ikhelowa Mohammed Kensington is the chairman of the burgeoning GSM Village Association on Airport Road, Benin City, the Edo State capital, where mobile phones, laptop computers and a wide array of technology goods and services are on offer.

In this interview with Naomi Emovon and Uyiosa Isaac, he gives an overview of activities, prospects and challenges in the business environment.

The GSM Village, comprises of different functions and activities, please explain?

We deal in different gadgets and devices, including software, hardware for laptops, PS games, phone repair, sales of Belgium and new phones, graphics and web designing and other related ICT devices

and services.

Are there an internship and skills acquisition programmes available here and how long do they take?

Internship training depends on the persons interest and ability to learn. We have one year training and also six months training too. For instance, the appointment is one year and if the individual wishes to learn for six months, he or she can also take the decision if the individual is capable of learning fast.

During the internship process, the individual will be taught in a practical and research way, not only in the method of explanation. We have varieties of internship an individual can learn from.

There is software and hardware management for both phones and laptops, repairs of gadgets including phones, lap-

tops, Bluetooth devices, headsets and games pad, graphics and web design and other related ICT gadgets, and services.

Do you render free training for those who cannot afford the cost?

Yes, we train 50 youths from various organisations yearly. We help in building and engaging young minds on this skill acquisitions. For a period of six months without payment. After six months, if the individual wants to continue the internship, he/she will have to pay for training.

We have trained so many persons, with this business and they are benefiting from the business today. We have done this program three times, starting from Azura Power in 2022, we trained 50 persons. In 2023, we trained 50 persons from

Edo Jobs. This year, we plan on training 50 persons from Coca-Cola organisation.

How many people do you train for internship per shop?

The maximum space for an internship per slot is 20 persons. It is done according to size of the shop, and how capable the owner of the shop is in training.

Do you have an association?

Yes, the Great GSM Village Association.

Are there dispatch riders, available to deliver goods from and to your clients?

Yes, they are available for sellers in the market who want to deliver goods.

Do you accept instalmental payments for goods?

Instalmental payments are only available for internship.

How much does a shop owner pay for a shop on average and taxes?

The amount would depend on the size of the shop. For a big sized shop, it could go for as much as N300,000 to N500,000 while a smaller space like a kiosk, small tent and space pays N150,000 to N200,000 for rent yearly. These prices depend on the value of goods the person wants to sell and relate to the space size to rent.

For taxes, governmental bodies are in charge of taxes but it relates to the space of a person's slot/shop. All necessary payments will be made known while accounting for space in this computer village.

Do roadside sellers and hawkers in this computer village pay taxes too?

For roadside shops and hawkers, they have a way of paying tax but they are not necessarily taxed like those who have shops.

Do you have challenges in this Computer Village that you want to bring to the attention of the government?

Yes, power outages and loan grants. The issue of light affects so many activities in this computer village, marketers, repairers are not able to make much sales due to power shortage. We want government to help us with this power issue as well as with the acquisition of loans to enable this Computer Village expand and boost business growth. We will be grateful if granted.



MR. IKHELOWA MOHAMMED KENSINGTON
Chairman GSM village, Airport Road, Benin City.

Africa smartphone shipments rise on low-end models

BILL OKONEDO
WITH AGENCY REPORTS

IDC reported smartphone shipments in Africa were up 12 per cent year-on-year in Q4 2023 to 19.8 million units, due in part to strong uptake of low-end Chinese brands across the region.

It noted the increase came in the face of high inflation, local currency devaluations and foreign exchange shortages.

In contrast, IDC stated Africa's feature phone market shipments decreased 7.8 per cent over the same timeframe to total 20.9 million units.

By country, IDC analyst George Mbuthia stated Kenya recorded the highest growth rate in terms of smartphone shipments in Q4, owing in part to mobile phone financing schemes enabling consumers

to buy new smartphones by making payments over a long period of time.

Nigeria posted the second-largest growth rate "thanks to a strong push by Chinese brands," while South Africa recorded a decline "due to the challenging economic environment and partly due to delays in shipments at the country's ports"

IDC noted Transsion devices continued to dominate Africa's smartphone market through low-end devices that cost \$100. Samsung and Xiaomi followed in second and third place, respectively.

For 2024, the research company forecast year over year growth in smartphone shipments of 2.8 per cent. Ramazan Yavuz, a senior research manager at IDC, noted "handset renewal cycles have slowed as

smartphones carry better features, increasing their longevity, and are more durable".

"However, in Africa, the transition from feature phones will

support smartphone growth in the short and medium term, while AI phones and 5G adoption will fuel Africa's smartphones growth in the long term".

Intel in line for \$8.5bn in direct US chip funding

Intel reaffirmed a commitment to pump \$100 billion into US chip manufacturing over a five-year period after securing a preliminary deal with the government to access up to \$20 billion in grants and incentives.

The chip company stands to gain up to \$8.5 billion in direct funding as part of the US CHIPS and Science Act, a programme agreed in 2022 which established a pot of \$52 billion to boost domestic silicon production.

Intel played up its position as "the only American company" which designs and produces "leading-edge logic chips" in a statement announcing the non-binding funding deal.

The government money will "advance Intel's commercial semiconductor projects in Arizona, New Mexico, Ohio and Oregon", it stated.

TSMC and Samsung are among the other chip manufacturers in the running for a slice of the CHIPS and Science Act backing.

Pryme strengthens strategic direction with new appointments

Pryme, financial technology firm operating out of Nigeria, has appointed Mrs. Ronke Sokefun as its board chairman.

Pryme also added Mr. Funmi Augusto to the company's board.

It expressed optimism in the two appointments stating that the combined expertise of the new appointees would bring value to the formulation of the strategic direction required to achieve its goal of becoming the preferred financial service provider for every young African and the world at large.

Prior to their appointments, Augusto started his career at Arthur Andersen (now KPMG Professional Services), where he spent over eight years working in the audit and business advisory units.

In 1992, he left Arthur Andersen to co-found IBFC Limited, which later in 1999 merged with the business consulting department of Augusto & Co. Limited to form Alliance Consulting.

Sokefun graduated with LLB (Hons.) in 1987 and was called

to the Nigerian Bar (also with honors) in November 1988. She has had a sterling career spanning over three decades, cutting across different sectors of the economy.

Her work experience spans over 30 years across the private and public sectors, some of which include, but are not limited to, serving as the immediate past board chairman of the Nigeria Deposit Insurance Corporation (NDIC), currently a board member at Oando PLC, which is one of Africa's leading energy solutions providers. She also sat on the board of the telecom giant, Celtel/Zain (now Airtel). She served in this position until 2011, when she was called to public service in Ogun State and proceeded to serve as a 2-term commissioner, holding diverse portfolios.

She is a fellow of the Institute of Directors, a member of the Institute of Chartered Secretaries & Administrators, the Nigerian Bar Association, the International Bar Association, and the Association of International Petroleum Negotiators.

Sports

● Football ● Athletics ● Gulf ● Basketball ● Tennis ● Boxing

13th African Games 2023: Team Nigeria finish second with 120 medals

EDWARD OSEGHE

Following the conclusion of the 13th African Games 2023 in Ghana on Saturday, the final ranking medal table has revealed that Team Nigeria finished second.

Egypt top the medal ranking table with a total of 189 medals (101 gold, 46 silver and 42 bronze). Behind the North Africans is Nigeria in second position.

The Nigerian contingent raked in 47 gold, 33 silver and 40 bronze medals across 25 sports at the competition.

Weightlifting produced Nigeria's highest medal haul. The team garnered 32 medals — 16 gold, 10 silver and six bronze medals.

Athletics was Nigeria's second

most productive sport at the Games, with 22 medals won.

Tobi Amusan won her third consecutive African Games gold medal in the women's 100-meter hurdles. She then anchored the women's 4x100 meters team to a gold medal. Ese Brume retained her crown in the women's long jump, while Chukwuebuka Enekwechi reigned supreme in the men's shot put.

Blessing Oborududu and Odunayo Adekunle were pristine as wrestling earned Nigeria 11 medals.

Nigeria won eight gold medals in a day in boxing, while arm wrestling also produced 13 medals.

South Africa is in third position with 106 medals (32 gold, 32 silver and 42 bronze).



Other countries that complete the top five are Algeria with 114 medals (29 gold, 38 silver and 47 bronze) and Tunisia with 87 medals (21 gold, 27 silver and 39 bronze).

The host country Ghana is in sixth position in the final medal standings with 68 medals (19 gold, 29 silver and 20 bronze).

The likes of Morocco, Ethiopia, Mauritius and Kenya complete the top 10 in the list.

The next edition of the African Games will be held in Cairo, Egypt, in 2027.

Super Eagles, Mali friendly: Bassey to miss tie again

Nigeria's Super Eagles will take on the Eagles of Mali in another top-grade international friendly match at the Grand Stade de Marrakech, on Tuesday.

It has been reported that Fulham defender, Calvin Bassey, will miss the Super Eagles' friendly encounter due to injury.

Bassey missed the Super Eagles' 2-1 friendly victory against the Black Stars of Ghana due to an injury.

The center-back didn't train with his teammates in the

build-up to the game and was named among the substitutes.

The former Ajax player has now been forced to return to his club due to the setback.

All the remaining 22 players are available for selection.

Recall that in a high-profile friendly match on Friday, the Super Eagles of Nigeria defeated the 10-man Black Stars of Ghana, thereby winning back after their heartbreaking loss in last month's Africa Cup of Nations final.

The Super Eagles defeated their West African rivals 2-1 in Marrakesh, their first game since blowing a first-half lead to lose 2-1 against hosts Ivory Coast in the AFCON showpiece back in February. This victory boosted interim manager and Nigeria legend Finidi

George's hopes of taking over as manager of the team full-time.

With attacking talisman Victor Osimhen sidelined by injury, Rangers forward Cyriel Dessers handed dominating Nigeria a well-earned edge from the penalty spot.

After yet another disappointing AFCON campaign, Jerome Opoku was eventually dismissed under mysterious circumstances, leaving the Black Stars with a mountain to climb.

Ademola Lookman, a substitute, scored a late goal for Nigeria to extend his impressive run of play at the international level.

Later, Jordan Ayew provided a consolation goal by sending Stanley Nwabali flying from 12 yards.



NPFL: Enugu Rangers replace Lobi Stars as new leaders

The pulsating race for the Nigerian Premier Football League, NPFL, crown took another dramatic twist this weekend, as Enugu Rangers leapfrogged Lobi Stars to seize control of the summit.

At the Enyimba Stadium in Aba, it was the Flying Antelopes who reigned supreme against neighbours from Imo States Heartland with an emphatic 2-1 victory.

Ifeyanyi Onyebuchi opened the scoring when he rose highest to thunder home a thumping header, handing Rangers a deserved lead.

Nine minutes after the restart, Kalu Nweke's beautiful strike doubled the visitors' advantage with a thunderbolt that left the Heartland keeper grasping at thin air!

The hosts managed a late consolation, but Fidelis Ilechukwu's men held firm to secure a monumental three points.

While Rangers were soaring in Enyimba, Lobi Stars stumbled on home turf against Bayelsa United.

Sunday Chinedu's 61st-minute piledriver looked to have the Pride of Benue on course for victory, only for Kehinde Lawal to strike back with a 79th-minute leveller for the visitors.

The 1-1 stalemate saw the Yes Father side lose their position at the top of the standing as Rangers seized pole position with 48 points to Lobi's 47.

With the stakes continuing to rise in this year's exhilarating NPFL run-in, neither of the front-runners can afford any further slip-ups in their quests for glory.

Airpeace Onyema advocates for homegrown talent to lead S'Eagles

PRINCESS NZEREM

The CEO and Managing Director of Airpeace, Allen Onyema, vehemently opposed hiring a foreign coach to take charge of the Nigerian senior football team.

Currently, the Super Eagles are without a coach following the expiration of Jose Peseiro's contract in February.

Recall that the former Sporting Lisbon and Porto manager guided Nigeria to a commendable second-place finish at the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) in February.

With the NFF opening the room for both domestic and foreign applications for the coveted coaching position, speculations have run rampant regarding the Federation's inclination towards appointing another foreign tactician.

Former international, Finidi

George, has been put in interim charge of the team for the friendly matches this international break against Ghana and Mali.

Onyema who is a staunch supporter of the Super Eagles, cautioned the NFF against opting for a foreign coach.

He argued that Nigeria possesses the talent and expertise domestically to head the national team and lead it to glory.

In a bold move, Onyema called upon fellow fans to unite

Netball: Sporting Coders programme produces 21 graduates

MARY OGWUCHE

Twenty-one female students of Tare Pet Montessori Group of Schools, Yanagao, Bayelsa State, recently graduated from the Sporting Coders pilot programme that was organised by Community Sports and Educational Development (CSED) Initiative and the management of Tare Pet Montessori Group of Schools.

This first-of-its-kind training programme in Nigeria which combined training in the sport of netball and coding is aimed at introducing the participants to basic training in coding, as well as laying the foundation for them to consider future careers in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), an area where female are currently under-represented.

The twelve weeks training programme which started in the first week of January 2024, involved the participants doing their coding training every Saturday morning for two hours, followed by two hours of netball training.

To sustain the interest of the students from the rigorous training of the netball coaches that Funsho Ekundayo led, the students were provided with two educational vouchers worth ten thousand Naira on each occasion.

Furthermore, three of their ex-netball colleagues who are

now in universities were provided with educational vouchers worth fifty thousand Naira by the training organisers, who have Lord's Taverners (UK-based charity), as their kits supplier.

The students were provided with twelve netball training/match balls and two separate sets of sports jerseys and training bibs.

During the period of the training course, CSED Initiative donated one hundred and ten general interest books to the school library, as well as a new laptop to the Management of the school, who did everything within their power to ensure the success of the training programme.

The parents of the 21 students were also not to be outdone, as they showed up in numbers during the school's recently held inter-house sport competition and on the graduation day of the Sporting Coders programme, to support their daughters.

The school proprietress, Mrs. Victoria Mologe urged the students to work hard and consider developing their sporting talent, while still pursuing their academic or professional careers.

Tare Pet School is currently the netball champion of Bayelsa State. The captain of the team, Alaere Wisdom, lauded the coaches, parents, teachers, and sponsors for providing them with the opportunity to access this free girl child-friendly training programme.



Tennis: Norrie, Alcaraz through to Last 16 in Miami Open

Cameron Norrie followed in Andy Murray's footsteps into the third round of the Miami Open with a 7-5 6-7(4) 6-2 win over Flavio Cobolli.

The British No. 1 needed just over two and a half hours to overcome the young Italian in the pair's first encounter, and Norrie had to dig deep to get the job done.

Cobolli hit 15 aces and 33 winners during the match, but it was Norrie's steadiness and composure that saw him through, breaking his opponent

five times across the course of the match, and winning 76% of points on his first serve.

The 30th seed sets up a meeting in the third round with Daniil Medvedev, the defending champion and current world No. 4.

Meanwhile, the world No. 2 Carlos Alcaraz is also into the next round with a scintillating performance at the Hard Rock Stadium, beating his compatriot Roberto Carballes Baena 6-2 6-1.

The Spaniard is looking to complete the 'Sunshine Double'

following his victory at Indian Wells last week, and recoup the title that earned him his first ATP Masters 1000 crown back in 2022, when he defeated Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, and Alexander Zverev in succession.

Alcaraz was aggressive in his return, breaking five times throughout the match, and he also showed real proficiency at the net, winning 77% of his approach points.

He hit 18 winners - with the pick of the bunch a 107mph rocket off the forehand wing to break



serve at the start of the second set. "I defended well in the humid conditions. "I had to be patient. I had to

adapt to the conditions; the ball goes differently to Indian Wells and I had to see how it would be. I'm really happy with my

performance and how I hit the ball," said Alcaraz.

Alcaraz is the No. 1 seed in Florida in the absence of Novak Djokovic, who decided to miss the Miami Open after a shock defeat by Luca Nardi at Indian Wells.

The Spaniard will face the experienced and flamboyant entertainer Gael Monfils in the third round.

Jannik Sinner, the Australian Open champion, is also safely through to the next round with a comfortable 6-3 6-4 victory over Andrea Vavassori.

Oredo Games 2024: Council boss launches games, as Yusuf Alli hails initiative

EDWARD OSEGHE AND
KEHINDE OSAGIEDIE

The Executive Chairman, Oredo Local Government Council, Dr. Tom Obaseki, on Thursday stated his administration's commitment to sports development just as he vowed to internationalise his council area through sports.

The Oredo Council Boss made the commitment while declaring open a 3-day Boxing Tournament tagged, 'Oredo Games' at the Samuel Ogbemudia Stadium, Benin City.

Dr. Obaseki who revealed that sports is an integral part of his development programme vowed that his council will use sports in showcasing the God's given talents that abound in Oredo Local Government Area and Edo as a whole.

"We want to start the process of bringing back the good days of sports, and we are starting with boxing.

"Let me welcome everybody and appreciate the Executive Chairman, Edo State Sports Commission, Olympian Yussuf Alli for what he is doing for Edo State.

"We are recording another first with this Oredo Local Government Games Initiative. Just last week, we unveiled an inno-

vation that will transform how we will attract capital to support the huge infrastructure development we are planning for Oredo.

"Today, we have started another first which is to lead the process of bringing back sports in the role sports play in the society.

"We have launched Oredo Games with boxing, but we are not going to stop at boxing.

"Edo has produced world-class boxing champions like Davidson Anel and others who have taken the name of our state and country to the world. There is a strong connection between sports and development. That is what we are reenacting today.

"We want to encourage our people at the ward level to

embrace the initiative and we thank all those behind this. We want to be proud to have athletes from Oredo on the world stage," Dr. Obaseki said.

Speaking during the inauguration ceremony, the Executive Chairman, Edo State Sports Commission, Olympian Yussuf Alli, commended the Oredo Council Chairman for the vision and promised to support the laudable initiative.

"This is a laudable initiative that we as Sports Commission will like to support. This is the first of its kind in our state.

"We urge all the councilors and wards representatives to be committed to the Council Chairman's initiative."



Leao's rise, Chukwueze's struggle in Milan

IKPONMWOSA ODIGIE

Rafael Leao's performance in 2024 has been nothing short of remarkable, with the Portuguese winger making significant strides for both Milan and his national team.

In the past few months, Leao has featured in 17 matches, netting an impressive seven goals and providing six assists. His recent goal for Portugal against Sweden highlights his invaluable contributions to both club

and country. Leao's outstanding form has earned him the privilege of leaving international duty early, demonstrating the confidence and trust placed in him by both his national team manager and Milan's coaching staff.

The spotlight also falls on Samuel Chukwueze, who, despite showcasing glimpses of promise with three goals, has struggled to maintain consistency in his performances. Having arrived at Milan with high expectations, Chukwueze's

contributions have failed to meet the anticipated level, especially considering his previous success at Villarreal. Peppe Di Stefano emphasizes the importance of Chukwueze elevating his game in the coming weeks, particularly with crucial matches on the horizon for Milan. Failure to do so could jeopardize his place in the team lineup.

As Milan enters the decisive phase of the season, Leao's impressive form offers optimism for the team's success. However, the potential improvement of Chukwueze is equally crucial in determining Milan's ability to achieve its goals.

The contrasting performances of Rafael Leao and Samuel Chukwueze present a narrative of success and struggle at AC Milan. As the team approaches the critical stages of the season, the performances of these two players will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in shaping Milan's fortunes on the field.



World Open Snooker 2024: Trump secures second trophy with impressive win over Junhui

Judd Trump has secured his second World Open title with a 10-4 win over Ding Junhui on Sunday, in Yushan, China.

The world No. 2 showed his quality to overcome the home favourite, who had had to endure a marathon semi-final with Neil Robertson the day before. A final pink pot gave the Bristolian top seed the victory, in a match where he racked up two excellent centuries, including a 130 break.

The Bristolian, the event's top seed, repeated his 2019 success after five years away from the tournament, and he stamped his authority on the final in the early stages, building a big lead

that left the home favourite Ding struggling to keep the pace.

Trump had overcome Jackson Page 6-2 in the semi-finals to reach the grand finale, while Ding, the 11th seed, white-washed Ronnie O'Sullivan's conqueror Hossein Vafaei 5-0 in the quarter-finals before scraping past Neil Robertson 6-5 in the last four.



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Golf: Svensson defeats Aphibarnrat, wins Singapore Classic

Jesper Svensson won his first DP World Tour event on Sunday after beating Kiradech Aphibarnrat in a playoff at the Porsche Singapore Classic.

Svensson tapped in for par at the par-5 18th and the win at the third playoff hole after Aphibarnrat could only make a bogey after his third shot rolled off the green and down the

slope at the back at the Laguna National Golf Resort Club.

The Swedish player shot a 9-under-par 63 in the final round to match the course record, one better than his Thai opponent, with both finishing on 17 under 271 overall to force the playoff.

Both players made birdies on the first playoff hole and the matched par scores on the sec-

ond before the decisive third trip up the 18th.

"It's been a lot of good golf so it was nice to finally come out on top. "It's very hard to win so it's really nice.

"It's been a long journey. To win on my first season out here, I couldn't have dreamt of it. It's always been a dream to be a winner... and to achieve it feels amazing," Svensson said.

CLASSIFIED

EGHIARIBHOR

That I wish to add EGHARIBHOR to my names IGBEN CLEMENT. Henceforth, I wish to be known and addressed as IGBEN CLEMENT EGHARIBHOR. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

ESTHER

I, formerly known and addressed as ESTHER EKHODIAEHI now wish to be known and addressed as ESTHER AGBONGHAE. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

ESOSA

I, formerly known and addressed as MISS OMOFESE ESOSA EDNA now wish to be known and addressed as MRS. SUMANU ESOSA EDNA. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

ARIAMIATOR

That OBOR EDITH SANDRA, EDITH SANDRA OBOR, EDITH EWEMANDE ARIAMIATOR and ARIAMIATOR EDITH is one and the same person. Henceforth, I wish to be known and addressed as ARIAMIATOR EDITH. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities should take note.

IKPONMWOSA

That I wish to add EAGLE to my names IKPONMWOSA PAUL. Henceforth, I wish to be known and addressed as IKPONMWOSA EAGLE PAUL. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

IMEGU

I, formerly known and addressed as AKOR AUGUSTA IMEGU now wish to be known and addressed as EFOSA AUGUSTA IMEGU. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

NGOZIKA

I, formerly known and addressed as NWANKWO CATHERINE NGOZIKA now wish to be known and addressed as MRS. NWANKWO-MMADUBUIKE CATHERINE NGOZIKA. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

OSARO

I, formerly known and addressed as OSARO AIKHIOBARE, now wish to be known and addressed as OSARO ENDURANCE AGBONLAHOR. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

IMARIABE

I, formerly known and addressed as MISS OSEMWENGIE IMARIABE FAVOUR now wish to be known and addressed as MRS. SAMSON IMARIABE FAVOUR. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

CHINASA

I, formerly known and addressed as OFOZE CYNTHIA CHINASA now wish to be known and addressed as NWANKWO CYNTHIA CHINASA. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

EZEGBE

I, formerly known and addressed as OSAHENKHOE EZEGBE now wish to be known and addressed as OMOROGBE EZEGBE EVANS. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

OKEMA

I, formerly known and addressed as GLADYS OKEMA now wish to be known and addressed as VIVIAN ANITA OKEMA OKAFOR. All former documents remain valid. Concerned authorities, banks and the general public should take note.

THE MondayInterview

Edo is deliberate in driving tourism with right policies, infrastructure —Dr. Oduwa-Malaka

Edo State, the Heartbeat of the Nation, boasts of a rich cultural heritage dating back centuries, making the state a natural tourist attraction. In the last over seven years, the Governor Godwin Obaseki-led administration has been deliberate and intentional in creating the right policies and atmosphere to give the sector the needed boost, and the results are showing. The Honourable Commissioner for Arts, Culture and Tourism, Dr. Uyi Oduwa-Malaka, speaks to a team of The Nigerian Observer comprising the Acting Managing Director/Managing Editor, OSA VICTOR OBAYAGBONA, Acting Editor, CHUKS OLUIGBO, and Correspondents NAOMI EWANSIHA and OLUWATOLA FAWEHINMI, on some of the achievements in this regard and efforts to ensure continuity. Excerpts:

Every ministry has a mandate. What is the mandate of your ministry and to what extent have you so far achieved it?

For us in Edo State, every ministry's mandate is, firstly, policy formulation. So, policy formulation, regulation, and monitoring. For my ministry, it's policy in the direction of the preservation, protection, and promotion of our cultural heritage. That's what the Arts and Culture Ministry is about. Arts and Culture is the gem of Edo, so whatever it takes for us to be able to preserve that is the sole responsibility of this ministry. And not just putting out the policies, you always have to think about the regulations attached. If you have a right policy framework and you don't have legal frameworks backing it, there's a problem. So what we try to do in Edo State is to ensure that where we put in policies, we also have the legal backing for all of them. That's my immediate mandate.

Often, you see Arts and Culture as a ministry, but in your case it's Arts, Culture, and Tourism. So what are you doing to promote the tourism aspect of this ministry?

I started off by saying that my major mandate was in the preservation, protection, and promotion of our cultural heritage in Edo. That sentence in itself encompasses a lot of other stuff. So when you ask what we are doing to promote tourism, in Edo, this is our unique selling point, our arts and culture, and this puts us in a natural position to drive tourism. That's what we are basing our tourism on, arts and cultural heritage. Without that, we would be lost; we would be like every other state or every other body out there, but that's our unique selling point as Edo people.

In the next few days, your ministry will be organising the World Theatre Day programme here in Benin. Could you tell us more about it?

Yes. We have the World Theatre Day coming up on the 27th of March. This year, the theme is "The Promotion of the Culture of Peace". For us in Edo, we are globally known as peaceful people, but not to be taken for granted though. So this year, our theatre focus will be in promoting the peaceful aspects of our culture, the peaceful Edo. The national body also went a step further by creating dialogue around the creative economy, how we can make it more sustainable through theatre. That's the topic we're working on this year. And then, in the ministry, one of our four pillars is in collaborative efforts. Most times when we have to project any particular celebration or festival, as a ministry, we work through collaborations. This year, we are collaborating with the National Association of Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP) and our own sister agency, the Victor Uwaifo Creative Hub, to make sure that it turns out an excellent display of our art and our culture in the theatre space. We are making the event open to our younger generation this time. We just returned from a road show where we were talking about a 30-year plan for Edo. We're talking about the future of Edo and this year, we are also talking about sustaining it. That's one of the things we're doing, ensuring that we bring our children on board and that they understand the importance of sustaining that culture, our theatre culture in Edo. It's a big playing field for us, one that has been largely untapped.

Interestingly, there's also the World Theatre Day for Children, which is celebrated March 20th, but because we don't want to have two separate celebrations, we're having the children come out on the day we're celebrating the World Theatre Day but the focus is now on our children, our youths. It's going to be a real display of creativity on stage, because we're bringing in the younger generation to just show us what they can also do in preserving our theatre culture.

The reforms of Governor Godwin Obaseki in the past seven and a half years have attracted a lot of hospitality investment into the state. You see new hotels springing up, but it seems the concentration is on the Benin City area. What about other locations in the state? What are you doing to encourage hospitality invest-

● DR. ODUWA-MALAKA



This generation, and by all means, I love the Gen Z, they just pack up their bags and they are off to explore one place or the other, whether you're ready for them or not, they are off on their own. What we've done so far is to say, 'Come on, we have a ministry that can actually provide some level of protection and guidance for you in that regard'... We have a lot of caves, we have a lot of water bodies. We have waterfalls. So there's so much out there, and there's a growing interest.

tors to also go into other parts of the state?

When we talk about Benin City, we're talking about Oredo, Ikpoba-Okha, Egor, some parts of Ughunmwonde and Ovia North East, which are the local governments that are considered part of the metro area of Edo State, but what we are seeing is not just happening in Benin. We've seen tourists come in, and instead of coming into Oredo or the Benin City metro area, they're actually going to our rural local governments. So there's been a deliberate interest in tourism at the rural areas. This generation, and by all means, I love the Gen Z, they just pack up their bags and they are off to explore one place or the other, whether you're ready for them or not, they are off on their own. What we've done so far is to say, 'Come on, we have a ministry that can actually provide some level of protection and guidance for you in that regard'. So a lot of them have been coming in, younger generation, from all over Nigeria, even from outside of Nigeria, and what we're seeing is a progression towards the rural local governments. So, for example, they want to go to see the hills in Somorika, they want to see Ososo, the caves in Edo North, in Etsako, and the two local governments in Owan. We have a lot of caves, we have a lot of water bodies. We have waterfalls. So there's so much out there, and there's a growing interest. Whether it's a festival or a carnival, there's something to celebrate. We have rich dances, we have rich music, even our cuisine. Everything in Edo just speaks to tourism and it's interesting. We are really tapping into that largely.

If you were to name five major things that the governor has done to give this sector a boost, what would they be?

Let me share some exciting news with you. Just a few days ago, Edo received an award for the most tourism-active state in Nigeria for 2023. I have been here a little over eight months but I

THE **MondayInterview**

know that when I looked at my schedule, all of those days, it's either engaging with a strategic stakeholder, an investor, another government from within and outside Nigeria, just one thing or the other. What's driving all of this? As I like to say, the government of Governor Obaseki does not react in a knee-jerk approach. We are a process government, so there's deliberate effort to actually design and have a total plan around whatever the government is projecting or whatever interest the government has. What has happened is, firstly, the mandate of policy formulation, having the right policies in place. When we started, we put together a lot of stakeholder engagements around the tourism master plan. We drove that with the biggest stakeholder engagement that you can imagine and we ended up producing a tourism master plan that gave rise to the tourism agency. So, right now in the state, we do have a tourism agency. You asked for five things. I'm going to list them for you.

First is policy. Policy in tourism led to the birth of the tourism agency with a sitting executive director. It's run almost like a private sector platform, which gives investors the comfort to come in and invest or do business with Edo State. So, you have the policy in place. You have the people - highly skilled, highly trained civil service. Digital governance.

You then to talk about the infrastructure. Firstly, the Victor Uwaifo Creative Hub. You know, when Governor Obaseki campaigned in 2016, he said, 'I'm going to create 200,000 jobs', and people thought, 'Oh, come on; where are you going to create the jobs?' But he made it. We broke it down in bits. So he started out by saying, 'No, we're not going to create jobs in the civil service. We're going to create the enabling environment for private sector to come in and invest in Edo', and that's what we've done. So with Victor Uwaifo Creative Hub, we engaged a lot of independent private-sector organizations, who brought in platforms to set up other companies. We created jobs for Edo people. By the end of the first tenure, we had already surpassed that mark by far in direct and indirect jobs created. We made sure that we provided a platform for our creative Edo youths all over the state. And when I talk about Edo youths, Edo is a very hospitable state, so I'm not just talking about Edo by birth; I'm talking about those who have stayed in Edo, some children who were born here, they have never been to their own home states, and they know no other place but Edo. So we're not just carving out a niche, or saying you must be Edo, no. We are promoting Nigeria. Look at your team; I was very excited when you came in and introduced a set of young people who come from different backgrounds across Nigeria. That is the show, that is the face of Edo that we want to project as well.

Then, we also have the Edo Film Project. Edo Film Project was set up because we decided that as part of our plan, we would reposition Edo as a film production hub in Nigeria. How do you go about achieving that without having the right infrastructure or the enabling environment? What we did was to ensure that in trying to drive production into Edo, we create the platform for them. What Edo State government offers to production houses coming into Edo are free accommodation, free transportation, free security, free shoot permits, free props, locations across the state, and we actually go in as a ministry and are involved in what they are doing. We're trying to drive a 70-30 ratio - Edos in that production must be nothing less than 70 per cent, while the 30 per cent could be technical staff coming into Edo. We also put in place a mentorship programme so that where you bring in the technical expertise from outside of Edo, we have our own Edo citizens sitting with you on the job and learning something in the process, thereby ensuring that there's knowledge transfer.

Then the beauty, the gem of Edo that's going to blow out very soon, the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA). There's been a gradual progression from it being the Edo Museum of West African Art to the Museum of West African Art. Why so? When we engaged the international community, they looked at us and said, 'You're narrowing yourself if you put the Edo there'. This museum is going to serve not even West Africa alone, but sub-Saharan Africa. That is just being modest because it's actually going to serve the world.

What are we trying to do there? The Museum of West African Art has been broken into three phases. The first phase is an institute that will be involved in training, attracting academics from all over the world, art enthusiasts, travellers, tourists, to come in there, engage with our own homegrown and other international artists, and then be able to do some academic work in the space of arts, culture, and creativity generally. It also provides a space for moving exhibitions. In the month of April, Edo State, and our own governor, Mr. Godwin Obaseki, will be leading the Nigerian team to the Venice Biennale, the biggest art exhibition in the world. Edo is going to have a stand there. That is just saying that we're doing the right things every time we make a move, deliberate moves. The second phase of the MOWAA is the rainforest area, which is going to capture the way that we had our environment in the past. Edo's vegetation is rainforest, so we're going to recreate the rainforest in that second phase on what we call "our sacred grounds". Where we are building the MOWAA is actually where our old palace stood. When the Benin Massacre happened, that was where the palace went down, and there was nothing left there, but that's where we are creating the Museum of West African Art. It's also so much a part of our history, our heritage. So we're going to create the rainforest region in that space, with simulations, so that when you walk through it, it almost sounds like you're going through the real forest as it used to be in those days.



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Finally, we have the third phase, which will house the actual museum. Many people often get confused. They ask, 'Oh, is this the museum?' The museum is a huge project. It's a three-phase approach - the institute, the rainforest, and the museum. By the time the first part is completed, which is in, I think, August/September of this year, the traffic that will come into Edo, we may not even be able to manage it.

Then, if you step out of the Secretariat and take a look around the area, you can see a lot of beauty springing up every day. We have the Edo Mall. Tourism is in different areas. People can travel just for shopping. There's that bit of tourism that you just want to go have some kind of retail therapy, visit places, buy stuff. There is sports tourism. We have the Samuel Ogbemudia Stadium, which is a beauty on its own. Our Edo Mall is going to attract shoppers from all over the world because we're going to have different outlets there by some renowned brands. We have four cinema spaces there right now, fully operational. There was a movie premiere there, our own story, too, an authentic Edo story. It was the first premiere at the Edo Mall, at Genesis Cinema, 'Osato', by an Edo director. So, Edo State is deliberate in driving tourism, and we're attracting a lot of big-time investors every day.

So, you have what you want to do, but you will not be in that seat forever. People coming after you, they may think differently. What are you doing to ensure continuity?

Government policies, government directions, backed with laws and the right regulation. There are certain laws in place that will make sure that no one comes in tomorrow and just throws everything away. It will have to go through a process, and we know how difficult it is to be able to do that. But more importantly, the people. I am a political appointee but I work with an amazing team of civil servants who are the actual engine of government. Whether you like it or not, they are our reservoir, they are our

archives, everything. I can be in this office today and move to another ministry tomorrow, but what Edo State government does in ensuring continuity is that everything is domiciled in the civil service. So whether I'm here as commissioner or not, it should just be like a plug-and-play system. When I leave and the next person comes in, there is e-governance. We are the first state in Nigeria to go fully digital; paperless government. In fact, now even other countries are coming to understudy. What can be more than that? So everything you want to see is actually there. Technology is driving everything. When you come in, there's a historical background to whatever you're doing. You're able to trace what we did with tourism, for example; see where we stopped. Who were the players? Who were the people responsible for each area? So you're able to see all of that, through technology.

I'm also throwing that back to the Edo people. You can't take one step forward and take ten steps backward. So our next decision has to be deliberate; it has to be intentional. This is the Ministry of Arts and Culture. You have a healthy work environment. This is the only state, I think, across Nigeria, where civil servants get paid as and when due. So why would you want to reverse all of that? So I'm throwing it back to the people. For you to ensure that all of this continues to go on, make sure that in your decision for who takes on the baton, you put all of that into consideration. Governance has changed. The governor is very deliberate, and we are his foot soldiers, whether we like it or not and we're passing it on. We're not going to sit down there. I will go to the field and campaign vigorously to make sure that we get the right leadership in place, and I know a lot of my colleagues will do that. So it's back to us.

Your ministry was involved in the recent read-a-thon by a young lady, Osariemen Angel Asein. What led to that and what's the message from that outing?

I spoke about the resilience of the Edo child. What we saw at the read-a-thon by Osariemen Angel, a young girl who decided to go on a read-a-thon for 200 hours and even went above to 230 hours, was part of that die-hard spirit of an Edo child. Wherever we find ourselves, we always try and get something productive out of it. So for us, what Osariemen did was a reawakening of the reading culture amongst our Edo children. That whole exercise was driven by about five ministries in the Ministry of Education space but because she brought in the cultural aspect by reading Edo literature, which for us is a proud thing because we also want to tell our stories in our own way, that's why the Ministry of Arts and Culture was involved. Every child should be a reader in Edo. What she did was bringing that back into space and projecting the reading culture that the government is trying to project in the Edo child. It was a laudable project and she did brilliantly with the support of so many MDAs and my colleagues; even the governor. There was top government involvement in that. We are trying to encourage our young ones to look for what they know to do well, what they have an interest in and just bring it to the attention of the government, there is always someone that will listen. That whole conversation started with a visit to me. She doesn't live in Edo, she's a student of Lagos State University, but she came and said she wanted to do this and we all threw our weight behind her. This is what we project; government is here for you, you tell us what you can do and let's work together; it's a partnership, a very positive and progressive partnership that we will want to continue to grow.

You are a titled chief in Ozalla land. Could you tell us about it and what drives your interest in traditional affairs?

I'm the Uzoyare of Ozalla, that means 'the defender of the people'. And it's interesting because many people say, 'No, no, no, why are you doing the traditional thing?' I'm just really passionate about my culture, my heritage.

It's the sense of who I am. I am aware of who I am. I am a proud Edo woman and I bring that everywhere I go. I am wearing my coral bead, so I tell you about my bead, for example. I tell you that when you wear the "ivie", you can't do anything wrong. So this is my sense of pride, my sense of dignity as an Edo child. I am wearing my Idia head; Idia, warrior princess, warrior queen. It shows that tough side of the Edo woman, the resilience, the tenacity with which we drive anything, our sense of purpose, our true and total knowledge of our heritage. That's all I bring into everything I do and I am very passionate about being an Edo woman.

Finally, how do you balance being a wife, a titled chief, an administrator, and a mother?

I've been married for about 27 years, happily married with three amazing children; they are all adults now. My kids are 25, 23 and 21, but there was a time I had to make all the sacrifices. There was a time I took a five-year break to focus on my children and my home and I preach that to every young girl out there - you need to transfer your values to your children in the right way and you don't leave that to anybody. Times may be difficult, but make sure you are teaching your children the right things. I took a five-year break from banking to raise my children myself; that was important to me, and when I came back some of my mates had gone ahead of me but I made my choices, and life is about the choices you make. I am married to a very supportive husband, so every time I shine, it is always him pushing me and saying, 'Go out there, I am right here, I got your back'. So a very close-knit family is one of the things that give me a sense of balance in everything I do.

INSIGHT

The Nigerian Observer
...that the people may know

Reflecting on the brutal Transatlantic Slave Trade

25 March each year is the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, a day to honor the victims of slavery and to raise awareness about the dangers of ongoing racism and prejudice.

KINGSLEY IGHOBOR

Every day sees visitors breaking down in tears while touring 97,000-square-foot Elmina Castle, west of Cape Coast, Ghana. Built in 1482 by the Portuguese as a gold trading post on the Gulf of Guinea, it was turned into a fortress for the transatlantic slave trade by the Dutch in 1637.

These days tourists get to see the once-luxurious suites where the European slave merchants stayed and sexually exploited female slaves. They also see the dungeons that once housed the slaves and the dingy, dimly lit corridors that lead to the “door of no return.” This door is in the outer walls of the castle, facing the sea, and was so named because once slaves walked through it they never returned.

At the “door of no return” the slaves were led into boats that transferred them onto big ships farther down the sea, for the long and horrendous journey to the Americas.

In the travel book *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*, Patricia Schultz writes that by the 18th century, up to 30,000 slaves passed through the “door of no return” each year. Anouk Zijlma, a Malawian travel guide, says of her visit to Elmina Castle, “You can always feel the suffering in the air, it’s unsettling.”

Elmina Castle—designated a World Heritage Site by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) due to its significance—is one of many relics of slavery in Ghana and other African countries.

There is Cape Coast Castle, also in Ghana, visited in 2009 by former US President Barack Obama, his wife Michelle, and their daughters. President Obama said the site reminded him of man’s potential for “great evil.”

Goree Island in Senegal, another slave post, equally evokes spine-chilling emotions. After visiting Goree Island in March 2013, Cherno Bah, Sierra Leone’s Minister of Information and Civic Education, wrote, “I was humbled by my experience; the history of the slave trade is vicious.”

TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Nathan Nunn, economist and Professor in the Vancouver School of



DOOR OF NO RETURN IN OUIDAH, BENIN REPUBLIC.



GHANA, ELMINA CASTLE, SLAVE HOLDING CELL FOR 200 SLAVES

PHOTO: KURT DUNDY

Economics at the University of British Columbia, says that although Africa experienced four slave trades between 1400 and 1900, the transatlantic slave trade is the best known. The Portuguese started it in 1519, and by the time it ended in 1867, Britain, France, the Netherlands and others had all taken part in it. About 15 million people from West Africa, Central Africa and Eastern Africa were captured and shipped to European colonies in inhumane conditions. Around 9.6 million people are said to have survived, while millions of others died during the journey.

The transatlantic slave trade is a scar on the world’s conscience even as questions are still being asked as to why human beings inflicted such brutality on fellow human beings.

Jamaican-born American sociologist Orlando Patterson refers to slavery as “social death” because slaves were perceived as incomplete humans who were not fit to be society’s members.

But the world is now speaking with

one voice against the slave trade eras, and visits to former slave fortifications in Ghana, Senegal and elsewhere rekindle anger against such cruelty, past and present.

The United Nations General Assembly in 2007 declared 25 March of every year the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The day “serves as an opportunity to honor and remember those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system, and to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice today,” says the UN.

CONTEMPORARY SLAVERY

The UN wants all hands on deck to curtail modern slavery—a clear recognition of enslaving practices that exist even today. The UN high commissioner for human rights in 1997 established an expert team to deal with “contemporary forms of slavery,” including “debt bondage, serfdom, forced labour, child

slavery, sexual slavery, forced or early marriages and the sale of wives.”

Gulnara Shahinian, the first special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, says that “Women and girls who are forced to marry find themselves in servile marriages for the rest of their lives.... Nothing can justify these forms of slavery; not traditional, religious, cultural, economic or even security considerations.”

Ms. Shahinian was not speaking in abstract terms. The Public Broadcasting Service, a US-based nonprofit television network, reports that in Africa 42% of girls are married before the age of 18.

The International Center for Research on Women, a US-based nonprofit organization that supports women in developing countries, provides further statistics showing acute situations in many African countries. In Niger, for example, 77% of girls marry before they are 18 years old, while in Chad the percentage is 71%.

SLAVERY AND AFRICA’S UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Many researchers correlate Africa’s underdevelopment with the transatlantic slave trade. Mr. Nunn’s working paper “The Long-Term Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades” concludes that “the parts of Africa that are the poorest today are also the areas from which the largest number of slaves were taken in the past.”

In their research paper “The Fundamental Impact of the Slave Trade on African Economies,” Warren C. Whatley and Rob Gillezeau of Michigan University in the US concur with Mr. Nunn’s viewpoint. Resources were allocated “away from agriculture and industrial

work towards slave trade,” they argue.

In addition to causing depopulation, they maintain that the slave trade stunted Africa’s long-term development, sharpened divisions along ethnic and social lines and fostered a culture of violence.

ANNIVERSARIES GALORE

Nearly two centuries since emancipation began to gain momentum, the transatlantic slave trade is still an emotional subject. Late Kenyan academic Ali Alamin Mazrui championed reparations to assist Africans in Africa and in the diaspora to deal with poverty and good governance.

Mr. Mazrui said that skills transfer could be a major part of reparations because “historically, black people worldwide are damaged, marginalized and incapacitated due to the long history of victimization and exploitation.”

“We believe that reparations are an important issue for Africans and African descendants... We must confront the enduring legacy of the past, as it continues to impact the lives of millions of individuals,” says Epsy Campbell Barr, former Vice President of Costa Rica and current chair of the UN-established Permanent Forum on People of African Descent.

For the UN, scholars like Mr. Mazrui and many others, 25 March presents an opportunity to celebrate and refocus attention on arresting all forms of modern-day slavery.

This article was first published in Africa Renewal in 2013 and has since been updated to reflect current realities.