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**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
PRESIDENT OLUSEGUN OBASANJO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURAL
MEETING OF COUNCIL OF STATE
ON TUESDAY, 29TH JUNE, 1999
AT THE PRESIDENTIAL VILLA, ABUJA**

I warmly welcome you to this inaugural meeting of the Council of State, the first since the return to democratic governance. I want to seize this opportunity to congratulate the State Executive Governors on your success at the polls. It is my sincere hope that the confidence reposed in us by our people, and their expectations of us in terms of selfless service shall constitute the motivating force in all our policies, programmes and actions throughout our tenure of office. We all have cause to be grateful to the Almighty God for seeing us through a successful transition, and we rely on His Grace in our effort to rebuild Nigeria.

We should regard the opportunity given us, to serve, by the people of Nigeria as a mandate from them and a command from God Almighty that we should spare no effort in rebuilding faith in our country. We should understand the clear message of the Nigerian people. In giving us their mandate, they want us to revitalise our political institutions and reinvigorate the economy. They want us to alleviate their poverty and reduce corruption in our body polity. They want us to ensure security of their lives and property. They want justice and equity in a country they can truly call their own. They want improvement in the quality of their life. They want much more.

As you are all aware, the Constitution prescribes an important role for the Council of State. It is the duty of this Council to advise the President in the exercise of his powers on matters pertaining to National Population Census, the Prerogative of Mercy, the award of National Honours and the maintenance of public law and order, amongst other things. This forum should be made a veritable avenue for discussions on critical national issues and the nurturing of a good working relationship between the Federal and State Governments. I, therefore, call on all of us here present to imbibe a collective sense of purpose which will transcend narrow party loyalties and parochial considerations.

Appointments and Retirements in the Public Service

Since the coming into office of the present Administration, there has been among Nigerians a notable sense of euphoria mixed with great expectations. The advent of civilian democratic governance in place of prolonged military rule has given rise to these feelings. Recent changes affecting appointments and retirements

in the public service and the perception by the public of their fairness or otherwise have generated further excitement and discussions. I am aware of the criticisms that have trailed some of these appointments. However, I wish to inform you that the appointments were made with due regard to our vision to strengthen professionalism in the public service, including the Armed Forces. With regard to the nomination of Ministers, the cardinal principle that guided our choice of nominees was merit and geographical spread. None of the appointments or retirements was made with a view to marginalising any section of the country but to redress some of the anomalies found in the system.

Equally, retirements were done in order to protect democracy, reorientate the Armed Forces and subordinate them to civil authority. It has been observed that military officers who have held political office find it difficult to fit into regimental duties when they get back to the barracks. Their life style has been found to breed discontent amongst their colleagues who have not had the opportunity to hold political office. We seemed to have two classes of officer corps—those who held political appointments and those who had not.

Review Panels

Questions have been raised by the public concerning the propriety or otherwise of some of the appointments made to important public offices during the dying days of the previous administration. Similarly, some awards and licenses granted have been questioned. In order to disabuse the minds of the public, this Administration has set up Review Panels to examine these matters in order to unearth the truth and reassure the general public.

We cannot proceed to build new structures on wrong foundations. There is an unequivocal consensus that in the past, we have done very many things wrongly. We have set standards of public conduct which need to be repaired and corrected in order to send new positive signals which will redefined the ethics of public affairs management. If we must avoid a repeat of past errors, we should have patience to identify and correct these errors. It is for this reason that a seven-man Investigation Panel has been set up to inquire into cases of alleged human rights abuses committed by past Administrations. It is also for this reason that a twelve-man Panel has been set up to take an inventory of all uncompleted contracts, supplies and projects between 1976 and 1998. Another Panel to investigate Federal Government Landed Property has also been set up to identify and collate all Federal Government property which have been improperly alienated or are in danger of being improperly alienated. This Panel will identify persons responsible for the alienation and determine whether such alienation is in the public interest. We are

determined to leave no stone unturned in the implementation of whatever recommendations these panels may come up with. I am impressed by various reformative measures some of you have taken since you assumed office. It is an indication that you want to be partner with me in the crusade to rid our nation of the influence of corruption, greed and naked human brutality against fellow human being.

National Re-orientation

You would recall that one of the key planks of my inaugural speech was an expressed determination to fight corruption. Our policy so far has therefore focused on establishing firmly the ethics of accountability, transparency and return to established procedures in the running of our public services. To this end, the "Civil Service Rules" and "Financial Instructions" have been reviewed and given pride of place. I wish to repeat for emphasis that this government has no room for corrupt Nigerians whose idea of public service is self-enrichment and opportunism. The anti-corruption bill which I have placed before the National Assembly is a clear testimony to our avowed determination to take the fight against corruption to its logical conclusion. Furthermore, the country needs a complete re-orientation in all other spheres of our national life. We shall work conscientiously to re-engineer attitudinal change which will espouse the dignity of labour and the importance of integrity, honesty and other similar virtues in public life. The young will be moulded, the illiterate will be educated, the adult will be persuaded, while everyone will be mobilised to appreciate the virtue of a corrupt-free, industrious, honest and disciplined society.

National Security

The security situation in the Niger Delta Area remains fragile and largely volatile. In order to provide security and maintain law and order, we have had to deploy combined teams of Military and Mobile Police personnel to strategic locations. I have also personally visited the Niger Delta area and held useful discussions with the youths and elders. While encouraging dialogue, Government is also trying to find a lasting solution to the situation in the Niger Delta. In this regard, we are already developing a master-plan to guide the systematic development of the area. I, therefore, appeal for calm, patience, and understanding, to allow us enough time to bring about lasting and suitable improvements in the lives of the people of that area.

The menace of armed banditry has assumed an alarming dimension nationwide, particularly in the North-Eastern part of the country. Efforts by State Governments to curb the menace have been relentless but not completely effective. Only last week, I held a meeting with the nine State Governors in the North-Eastern and North-Western parts of the country during which we considered strategies for combating armed banditry. Besides, the Federal Government has

also taken up the matter with the neighbouring countries whose nationals are involved in this heinous crime. At the meeting with the neighbouring countries, it was resolved that concrete measures would be taken to eradicate the menace through the establishment of joint military operations, joint and continuous patrols, sharing of intelligence, prosecution of suspects, regular meetings of relevant officials and enhanced logistic support to security agencies.

Energy Supply

It is my pleasure to inform you that the Kaduna and Port-Harcourt refineries have resumed production, while the Turn Around Maintenance (TAM) of the others is nearing completion. With these developments, the fuel supply situation in the country has improved considerably. As for electricity supply, government has decided to rehabilitate the power generating stations as well as the transmission and distribution system of NEPA in order to stabilise power supply in the country. To this end, the Central Bank of Nigeria and the Federal Ministry of Finance have been directed to urgently provide funds to enable NEPA undertake the rehabilitation of its facilities all over the country.

Inter-Governmental Relations

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, even though we operate a federal system of government which confers relative autonomy and operations flexibility on the three tiers of government, we also need to co-operate with one another in order to achieve the national developmental objectives. We need each other, and we should always strive to carry everyone along in all our national pursuits. The Constitution gives the Federal and State Governments concurrent responsibility in areas like Agriculture, Education, Health, Water Supply, etc. This calls for a harmonious relationship between the States and the Federal Government in all matters because what happens in one tier of government has ripple effects in others.

The Economy

The crises of the Nigerian economy is the crises of poverty and mismanagement. The common man has borne the burden of bad policies and mismanagement for too long. The situation is compounded by the high rate of inflation, low capacity utilisation in the manufacturing sector, insufficiency of food production, high import dependency and general unemployment and under-employment. As a first step in our strategy to revive the economy, we have set up a committee comprising representatives of the Public and the Private Sectors of the economy to advise and help in formulating policy on how best to move the economy forward particularly on how to halt the de-industrialisation of the Nigerian economy. With regard to food security and food self-sufficiency, we will address all

the dimensions of the problems in the agricultural sector, with particular reference to the production and distribution of fertilizer and farm implements, the efficient management of agricultural credit schemes and extension services and the role which States and local government should play in our agricultural development effort. Steps have been taken to ensure that there is availability of fertilizers to the farmers in the next couple of weeks. It may be late for some but it will still be timely.

We view the poverty situation in the country with great seriousness, most especially as policies and programmes on poverty alleviation put in place by previous Administrations have been generally ineffective. We have observed that there are in existence far too many agencies engaged in the area of poverty alleviation. At the last count, there are eighteen programmes and agencies still being served ranging from DFRRRI to FEAP. We have, therefore, commenced the process of rationalising those agencies with a view to making them slimmer and more effective. We are doing this throughout government establishments and agencies. As for employment, we appreciate that the level of employment is dependent on the level of performance of the economy. We shall, therefore, put in place every possible incentive to increase capacity utilisation in industry, and create the type of environment that will attract more direct investment in the country. In view of the unacceptable level of unemployment, particularly among the youths, we should endeavour to create new avenues for employment generation and opportunities for self fulfilment. Along this line, we are asking the State Governments to initiate policies and programmes to re-invigorate the informal sector in their respective States, undertake employment generating programmes and aid the unemployed to create self-employment. At all levels of government, supervision is poor and collusion to perpetrate crime is rife. This has led to high level of fictitious employees notoriously known as ghost workers in almost all government ministries, departments and organisations. It is both immoral and criminal and it is a form of corruption which must be fought.

The issue of minimum wage for public Sector workers has been a source of agitation in the recent past. Although there seems to be relative peace now that the teachers have called off their strikes, we have to admit that complete industrial harmony is yet to be achieved. However, as part of the progressive evolution of democratic norms and institutions, we look forward to more meaningful co-operation with the Labour Unions through the establishment of a more dynamic framework for collective bargaining. It is such co-operation, coupled with understanding and sacrifice by all, that will help us to arrive at amicable solutions to the problems of the Nigerian workers.

Education

The educational sector has suffered a lot of setback over the years. A lot of the associated problems have to do with welfare of the teachers and inadequate awareness at the parental, community and local government levels. Consequently, the teaching profession has lost the glamour it has been known for. The revival of the sector is therefore a priority of this Administration. In the meantime, the problem of the payment of teacher's salary and raising awareness deserve urgent attention. It is in this regard that a policy machinery is being devised through which the three-tier of Government in the Federation will contribute to a pool of funds from which primary education will be funded and awareness will be raised.

This administration looks forward to an economy of vibrant partnership between Government and business. Private profit must look to promote public purpose and public good. In this vein, our Administration will pursue the policy of deregulation and privatisation of some State-owned enterprises when it is judged that their performance will be enhanced and their subsequent status will be of overall benefit to the nation. We promise to provide a stable and secure enabling environment for all those seeking to do legitimate business within Nigeria. We are also keen and determined to discuss all aspects of the country's foreign debt with the view to achieving a level of relief and remission that can be secured through negotiation and that help the sustenance of our democracy.

Foreign Policy

We will re-assert our position in the international arena playing God-assigned role in West Africa, in Africa and indeed in the world.

Conclusion

Your Excellencies, Your Royal highnesses, the task of moving Nigerian forward is one that this Administration is irrevocably committed to Federalism has worked for people in other lands ; it should also work for us in Nigeria. The onus of making it work rests on all of us, as it is the joint responsibility of all levels and arms of government to cooperate as best they could to make it work so that this nation may thrive. Although this august body does possess only advisory powers, yet it does possess great moral authority, and moral authority is at times as important as political power and authority. The Presidency will always solicit and place utmost reliance on the quality of our advice.

May the Almighty be with us.