



# NIGERIAN BAR ASSOCIATION

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## COVID-19 PANDEMIC – RELEASE III

### 1. Health and Economic Tailwinds

1.1 Yesterday, 14 April 2020, marked 3 (three) weeks since our Courts nationwide were shut down on 24 March 2020 as a pre-emptive measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic disease (“COVID-19 Pandemic”). Shortly thereafter, the Federal Government of Nigeria (“FGN”) mandated the complete lockdown in 3 (three) principal locations (*to wit*, the Federal Capital Territory, Lagos and Ogun States), even though, in truth, virtually the entire country has been in complete lockdown as a deterrent against the spread of the deadly COVID-19 disease. Mercifully, we have not received any report about any of our members that has been afflicted by or with this disease and we can only thank the Almighty for this and pray that He continues to envelope us in His protective arms. As a complement to our prayers, we advise all our members to practice safe and hygienic living, observe social and physical distancing and follow all the advisories of the Federal and State Governments, the World Health Organization and the Nigerian Center for Disease Control on the required measures that must be practiced to combat the virus.

1.2. On the economic front, this deadly pandemic has literally and tragically paused global and domestic economic activities and imposed grave and unheard-of economic hardships on all of us and, in particular, on our most vulnerable members. To illustrate, most of our members depend on daily court appearances and incorporation and related activities at the Corporate Affairs Commission for their livelihood. Those means of livelihood came to an abrupt and eerie stop consequent upon the COVID-19 imposed national lockdown. The abruptness of the lockdown accentuates our economic misery as and there was no room for “preparation” or “stocking up” howsoever. We truly identify and empathize with all our members who are experiencing grievous, harrowing and unforeseen hardships in these times.

#### NATIONAL OFFICERS:

Paul Usoro, SAN President;

Jonathan Gunu Taidi, General Secretary; Imo Stanley Chidozie, 1st Vice President; Dr. Dada Foluke Olayemi, 2nd Vice President; Igba Theophilus, 3rd Vice President; Banke Victoria Olagbegi-Oloba, Treasurer; Anosike Elias Emeka, Financial Secretary; Eze Nnamdi Innocent, Legal Adviser; Edun Olukunle, Publicity Secretary; Usman Joshua Enemali, Welfare Secretary; Ewenode William Onoriode, 1st Assistant Secretary; Obasi Chinyere Gladys, 2nd Assistant Secretary; Pepple Iniobong Irene, Assistant Financial Secretary; Lawal Akorede Habeeb, Assistant Publicity Secretary

## **2. COVID-19 Palliatives/Reliefs**

2.1 These moments also bring out the best in us. The truly public-spirited and silent philanthropists, those who are best described as “our brothers’ keepers” amongst us, are identified during crisis moments of this nature. Reports reaching me from some of our Branches have indeed identified some such lawyers who, in their generosity and without fanfare or public announcements, have opened their barn-stores to our less-endowed members. Some Branches have also been exceptional in proactively buying and distributing relief materials to their members. I salute these great men and women amongst our ranks. These are very commendable actions, worthy of emulation, and we particularly pray for Divine reward for our members who have shown such exemplary generosity and leadership in this extremely difficult and stressful period.

2.2. To complement the efforts of our Branches and members, we have today released 10% of the Bar Practice Fees to our various Branches and have agreed with the Branch Chairmen that these remittances would be substantially utilized by the Branches in ameliorating the economic pains and hardships of our most vulnerable members provided that they are up-to-date in the payment of their financial dues, given the fact that the 10% remittance was possible pursuant to their diligence in living up to their financial obligations to the Association.

2.3 To further augment the 10% remittance, we are in the process of constituting a blue-ribbon Welfare Committee with the immediate mandate, *inter alia*, to raise funds from our members and other public-spirited third parties for utilization in providing succor to extremely vulnerable members of our Association who are worsted and battered by these harsh economic circumstances. We would, in a matter of days, publish the membership of the Committee and, more importantly, the NBA-dedicated COVID-19 Bank Account to which members could send in their donations for the Committee’s assignment. Let me state in advance that, the *modus operandi* of the Welfare Committee including but not limited to its financial records and activities would be scrupulously and transparently maintained and published to all our members, not any different from our consistent publications of all our financial statements, accounts and reports since the commencement of our NBA administration in 2018.

2.4 I must mention that we have, like everyone else, heard and read of the COVID-19 relief measures that have been announced by FGN. We are however probing to

know how lawyers can benefit therefrom and will update our members with whatever information we can gather.

### **3. Use of Technology in Justice Administration**

3.1 I must point out that, COVID-19 has imposed on us an immediate and welcome review of our justice administration processes and methods. Without a doubt, we have been stuck in analogue mode for so long, to our extreme and untold detriment. We must deliberately and urgently introduce and institutionalize the use of technology in and for our justice administration.

3.2 To illustrate where we should be and must aim to be in regard to the use of technology in justice administration, a recent news release on 13 April 2020 by the Supreme Court of the United States of America gives us a foretaste:

“The Court will hear oral arguments by telephone conference on May 4, 5, 6, 11, 12 and 13 in a limited number of previously postponed cases . . .

“In keeping with public health guidance in response to COVID-19, the Justices and counsel will all participate remotely. The Court anticipates providing a live audio feed of these arguments to news media . . .

“The Court Building remains open for official business, but most Court personnel are teleworking. The Court Building remains closed to the public until further notice”.

3.3. According to the New York Times of 13 April 2020, this is “a major break with tradition” by the US Supreme Court even though “other courts have been hearing oral arguments online, with video”. That indeed is where we should aim to be and in very short order and within reasonable time. We must vow that, never again must or should unforeseen eventualities such as COVID-19 immobilize and totally paralyze us, as lawyers and justice administrators, to the detriment of justice administration and the rule of law.

3.4 The quoted release by the US Supreme Court above, I must mention, is merely illustrative of the uses to which technology could and must be deployed in the dispensation and administration of justice by our courts. The conversation on how, what, where and when to start the deployment, must commence now and NBA stands ready to lead that conversation in partnership with the Judiciary and the other branches of government who constitutionally have the responsibility for appropriating the required funds therefor.

3.5 The NBA plans to work with reputable and experienced technology advisers to produce a workable roadmap on the required use and institutionalization of technology in our justice administration in the coming weeks and would share the Work Product thereof with the Chief Justice of Nigeria, heads of our various Courts, and the executive and legislative arms of government, as required and necessary. As the conversation develops, we would keep our members suitably and adequately informed.

#### **4. Conclusion**

4.1 I must remind all of us again that “these dark days . . . will pass” and “we will survive the pandemic”. I encourage us therefore not to panic nor lose hope. We must persist in taking personal responsibility for preventing the spread of the dreaded virus by maintaining personal hygiene and social distance and following all the advisories on the mandatory measures therefor.

**Paul Usoro, SAN**  
**NBA President**