



NIGERIAN BAR ASSOCIATION

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STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE NIGERIAN BAR ASSOCIATION ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2020 ON THE GLOBAL THEME: “RECOVER BETTER – STAND UP FOR HUMAN RIGHTS”

The Nigerian Bar Association (“NBA”) joins the world today to mark the International Human Rights (“IHR”) Day, in recognition of the adoption and proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“UDHR”) by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The Declaration proclaims the inalienable rights which everyone is entitled to as human beings irrespective of race, colour, religion, sex, language, political opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. The 2020 theme globally is **“Recover Better – Stand Up for Human Rights”**. This theme is instructive in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic which ravaged the world this year and inadvertently centered the preservation of human rights at the core of the loudest and most far reaching agitations experienced.

The incidences following the outbreak of Covid-19 is riddled with reports of human rights abuses by governments, law enforcement agents, religious bodies and citizens all responding differently to the spread of the virus. The lockdown orders imposed to curb the spread of the virus allowed an introspection that created a sense of self awareness, national consciousness and youth patriotism which stirred a global agitation for a posturing of human rights at the center of our humanity, hence the unprecedented spate of protests experienced around the world, like #BlackLivesMatter and #EndSars which tackled police brutality and disregard for human lives by security operatives.

The responsibility to protect the human rights of citizens rests first with the government, however, we continue to see public authorities and government officials support policies that violate basic human rights while exploiting religious and ethnic sentiments to polarize and oppress citizens. The Nigerian government is reported locally and internationally to have used lethal force against its citizens around the country to suppress the #EndSars protests, with the #LekkiMassacre forming the highlight of an obvious disregard for the right to life, liberty and peaceful assembly of citizens. There were, amongst others, reports of frozen bank accounts of protest participants at the behest of government; restriction of access to websites and social media handles of protesters, including the infamous detention of the international passport of a legal practitioner who rendered pro bono services during the protests.

NATIONAL OFFICERS

Olumide A. Akpata, President

Joyce Oduah, General Secretary; John Aikpokpo Martins, 1st Vice President; Debo Adeyemo kazeem, 2nd Vice President; Mercy Ijato Agada, Treasurer; Olakunle Edun, Welfare Secretary; Raphael Nnamdi Anagor, Financial Secretary; Dr. Rapuluchukwu Nduka, Publicity Secretary; Uchenna Nwadialo, Assistant Secretary; Ferdinand Naza, Assistant Publicity Secretary

There is little progress on accountability for abuse by security forces even with the hearings at the various Judicial Panels of Inquiry and Restitution for Victims of SARS-Related Abuses. The question of why reports from previous investigative panels set up to check law enforcement abuses were never made public continue to be ignored. Recent indications that the Nigerian Police instituted (and later withdrew) legal proceedings challenging the validity of the investigative panels leave a bad taste in the polity.

The call to rise is now! We must rise as individuals and groups focused on effecting the change we desire. Our strength is in our numbers as great things happen when groups function effectively towards a common cause. In this regard, to build a future that protects the human rights of every Nigerian citizen, we must first institutionalize human rights on a national scale, a zonal scale, a community scale, a family-unit scale and on an individual scale. Until we all understand that everyone is born equal and deserving of their basic humanity, we will continue to struggle nationally and globally.

On our part and in keeping with our motto of "*Promoting the Rule of Law*" the NBA under my watch is not relenting in its quest to ensure that the NBA remains the leading watch-dog organization in Nigeria. To this end, we have initiated a number of human rights policies that are currently being implemented. For instance, we have established a dedicated and easily accessible public interest group that is focused on dealing with all public interest matters, including human rights violations; we have institutionalised a *pro bono* regime (with numerous lawyers across as volunteers) to provide free legal services to victims of human rights abuses; we are in collaboration with the National Human Rights Commission to provide human resources and representation for victims of human rights abuses around the country especially at the various #EndSARS panels of enquiry and we are working assiduously towards revamping the NBA Human Rights Institute and providing it with the political support and autonomy that it requires to function efficiently.

Institutionalizing human rights norms is essential to the sustainable achievement of the three agreed global priorities of peace, development and democracy. To this end, we must all lend our voices in unison when issues of human rights abuses are tabled, no matter how far they are from us or how separated we are from their effects. We are the foot soldiers for this daring assignment of firmly entrenching respect for human rights in every space, and we must not be seen to falter.

Olumide Akpata

President, Nigerian Bar Association

10th December 2020