

Edo election tribunal adjourns to March 3 as APC closes defence

The Edo State Governorship Election Petition Tribunal sitting in Abuja on Thursday adjourned proceedings until March 3 for the adoption of final written addresses after the All Progressives Congress (APC) closed its defence.

The APC had opened its

case on Wednesday to defend Governor Monday Okpebholo's victory in the September 21, 2024, governorship election, which is being challenged by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and its candidate, Asue Ighodalo.

Although the party initially planned to present 28 witness-

es, it ultimately called only four. Three of them alleged incidents of over-voting but admitted that results from the affected polling units had already been canceled.

During Thursday's proceedings, APC's lead counsel, Ferdinand Orbih (SAN), informed the Justice Wilfred Kpochi-led

panel that the party would not be calling additional witnesses, citing the unavailability of key documents.

"Yesterday (Wednesday), we promised to present 28 witnesses. However, after a comprehensive review and considering that the documents are still in Benin, we have decided

not to proceed with calling additional witnesses.

"My Lords, time is of the essence, and we do not want to waste the tribunal's time. We are happy to close the third respondent's case if it pleases your Lordships," Orbih stated.

Neither the petitioners nor the respondents objected to

the APC's decision to close its case.

With this, the tribunal formally closed the defence and adjourned proceedings until March 3, allowing all parties time to file and respond to their final written addresses before adoption on the scheduled date.

The Nigerian Observer



...that the people may know

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CBN retains N100 ATM fee for withdrawals below N20,000

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Edo govt reabsorbs sacked workers

EDWARD OSEGHE AND CHIDINMA KALU

The Edo State Government has reinstated over 2,000 workers who were recently delisted from the state payroll, reaffirming its commitment to improving workers' welfare and ensuring job security.

The announcement was made by the Edo State Head of Service, Barr. Anthony Okungbowa, on Thursday at the Government House, Benin City, following Governor Monday Okpebholo's directive.

This decision aligns with the administration's broader efforts to stabilize the civil service and maintain industrial harmony.

According to the Head of Service, the reinstated workers are drawn from various Ministries, Departments, and Agencies, including the Edo Broadcasting Service, Edo State Primary Healthcare Develop-

ment Agency, the Ministry of Justice, Urban Water Board, the Office of the Statistician General, Edo Specialist Hospital, and the Department of Educational Quality, among others.

Their reabsorption is expected to enhance service delivery and improve efficiency within the public sector workforce, he said.

In a related development, the Edo State Government convened a high-level engagement with organized labour, tagged Labour Parley, to address workers' concerns and strengthen government-union collaboration.

This initiative follows Governor Okpebholo's previous meetings with labour leadership, where he reiterated his administration's commitment to the well-being of civil and public servants.

The discussions, facilitated by the Office of the Head of Service, focused on key issues

affecting the workforce and proactive measures to prevent industrial disputes.

The Nigeria Labour Congress, the Trade Union Congress, and the Joint Public Service Negotiating Council actively participated in the discussions, presenting pressing demands such as the immediate implementation of the new minimum wage, a review of the contributory pension scheme to allow voluntary participation, full payment of salary arrears owed to workers at Usen Polytechnic, regular promotion of experienced civil servants instead of hiring external consultants, and the institutional-

ization of a 13th-month salary for all workers.

The labour leaders emphasized that addressing these concerns would improve job satisfaction, enhance productivity, and reduce industrial unrest.

Speaking during the engagement, Acting Chairman of the Edo State NLC, Comrade Ben Joman Eguakhide, commended the administration's worker-friendly policies, particularly the conversion of 360 casual workers into full employment, the recent upward salary review, and the reinstatement of over 2,000 delisted workers.

Similarly, a TUC representative, Comrade Joseph Wasa,

and JNC Chairman, Comrade Godwin Osamaye acknowledged the positive steps taken by the state government but called for further reforms, including salary harmonization, improvement in healthcare services, and the reconstitution of civil service committees to enhance transparency in workforce management.

Responding to the concerns, government representatives, led by the Head of Service, reaffirmed the administration's commitment to ensuring the welfare of civil and public servants.

Several resolutions were announced, including the establishment of a tripartite commit-

tee to negotiate the minimum wage, a legislative review of the contributory pension scheme, the recruitment of 700 new workers, including 300 cleaners with a minimum salary of ₦70,000, the reinstatement of a Civil Service Commission to be managed by retired civil servants, and a renewed focus on timely promotions and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms to address labour-related issues effectively.

As part of its long-term strategy to enhance government-labour relations, the Edo State Government pledged to institutionalize Labour Parley as a quarterly event.

House of Reps passes ₦54.99trn 2025 budget

The House of Representatives on Thursday passed the ₦54.99trn 2025 Appropriation Bill.

A breakdown of the budget showed N3.645trn for statutory transfers, N14.317trn for debt servicing, N13.64trn for recurrent expenditure and N23.963trn capital expenditure (development fund).

Last Week, President Bola Tinubu increased the 2025 fiscal year budget from an initial N49.7trn to N54.2trn, seeking approval from the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The Chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations,

Abubakar Bichi, while presenting the bill for consideration, stated that the committee met with the Presidential Economic Planning team to further discuss revenue projections and expenditure for the 2025 Appropriation Bill.

According to him, the 2025 Appropriation Bill was presented late, compared to that of 2024.

He urged the executive to present subsequent budgets to the National Assembly not later than three months before the next financial year, to maintain the January to December budget cycle.



INTERACTING MEETING:

Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economy, Wale Edun, and Director-General, Security Exchange Commission, Emomotimi Agama (left), during an interacting meeting with NASS Committee on Capital Market, at National Assembly, Abuja.

PHOTO: OMOYE AMINU

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Leo Atakpu bags ANEEJ's most valued staff award

The African Network for Environment and Economic Justice (ANEEJ) recently celebrated a significant milestone in its history as it honoured its Deputy Director, Comrade Leo Atakpu, with the Most Valued Staff Award for his 30 years of dedicated service.

The event, held at the organization's headquarters in Benin City, was a grand affair filled with joy, tributes, and heartfelt appreciation.

The Executive Director of ANEEJ, Rev. David Ugolor, presented the prestigious award, alongside a spot utility tool, symbolizing the organization's

gratitude for Comrade Atakpu's unwavering commitment and contributions.

The ceremony was held during an in-house celebration marking, not only Comrade Atakpu's 60th birthday, but also, ANEEJ's 30th anniversary - a double milestone for the organization.

In an emotion-laden speech, Rev. Ugolor highlighted the profound impact Comrade Atakpu has had on the organization and its mission over the past three decades.

He described Leo as a pillar of strength and an invaluable part of ANEEJ's success, emphasizing that his insight, dependability, and leadership

had not only strengthened the organization's work, but had also inspired colleagues.

He stated that from the very beginning, Atakpu's unwavering commitment as Deputy Director has been instrumental in the organization's growth.

He further prayed for continued blessings upon him and his family, expressing gratitude on behalf of the staff, management, and board of ANEEJ.

Ugolor presented the award as a token of appreciation, emphasizing that the spot utility tool symbolized the organization's deep gratitude for his exceptional leadership and dedication.

Comrade Leo Atakpu, who

attended the event with his wife and one of his children, expressed appreciation for the gesture.

He noted that this was the first time such a celebration was held in the office courtyard, a development that made it, even more special.

He reaffirmed his commitment to ANEEJ's mission, stating that the show of love would motivate him to continue serving humanity with even greater energy.

He also described the spot utility tool as a symbolic gift, representing the strength to keep pushing forward in the fight to improve the living

standards of the people.

The evening was filled with dancing, feasting, and heartfelt tributes, with colleagues encouraged to emulate Comrade Atakpu's dedication and passion for service.

Meanwhile, as part of the celebrations, ANEEJ has announced a special seminar to mark Leo's 60th birthday.

The seminar, titled "Tackling Multi-Dimensional Poverty in Nigeria: The Need for Reforms," will take place on Friday, February 14, 2025, with Prof. Patrick Ohikhe, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Wellspring University, Benin City, as the keynote speaker.

₦2.5bn DSO project: Court discharges, acquits ex-NBC DG Kawu Modibbo

Justice Folashade Ogunbanjo of the Federal High Court Abuja has discharged and acquitted a former Director-General of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Ishaq Kawu Modibbo and Pinnacle Communications Limited.

They were being prosecuted by the Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences (ICPC) of charges bordering on the ₦2.5 billion released to Pinnacle Communications under the Federal Government Digital Switch Over (DSO) project.

Delivering judgement on Thursday, Justice Ogunbanjo held that the ICPC was not able to prove the allegations against the defendants.

The judge further discharged the defendants on the grounds that the statements and evidence of the witnesses, could not pin any allegation

on the defendants.

She further held that some of the witnesses contradicted themselves, and none of their statements were able to link the defendants to the charge.

According to the judge, while some of the witnesses in their oral evidence, said the former Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, was misled in approving the payment of ₦2.5 billion to Pinnacle Communications Ltd, they failed to render any documentary evidence.

The trial of the former Director-General of the NBC lasted for six years.

He and Pinnacle Communications were prosecuted by the ICPC, on a five count amended charge over the release of ₦2.5bn to Pinnacle Communications Ltd, under the approval of Mohammed, under the FG Digital Switch Over (DSO) project.

RATAWU sets agenda for climate change action

HAMEED BRAIMAH

Broadcasters across the globe on Thursday marked this year's World Radio Day with a charge on the people to shun habits that exacerbate worsening State of the global climate.

Here in Benin City, the State Council of the Radio/Television, Theater And Arts Workers Union of Nigeria RATAWU in collaboration with Edo Broadcasting Service, EBS celebrated the day at the corporate headquarters of EBS, Aduwawa.

Reflecting on the essence of the theme of this year's celebration, Chairman of RATAWU, Edo State Council Comrade Raphael Ojekere acknowledged the crucial role played by broadcasters, producers and presenters in information dissemination and management industry.

Ojekere noted that the celebration of World Radio Day typifies the significance of reflection on the evolution of radio from the Aptitude Modulation and Frequency Modulation to the present Internet radio frequencies.

He expressed the determination of RATAWU members to effectively deploy the instrument of their trade to protect the people from the harmful effects of climate change through accurate information on the global phenomenon.

He asserted that the more

the people are armed with the right information on habits that nurture the ozone layer, the more they become less likely to indulge in practices capable of depleting it.

In a lecture titled 'Climate Change Imperatives of a Safer world' a veteran Broadcaster Justine Uwadiae asserted that radio being the fastest medium of mass communication, was most relevant in setting agenda for climate action for the people and government.

Uwadiae admitted that global organisations have taken actions aim at minimising the effects of climate change through global action plans that target habits that exacerbate the global problem, emphasising that more efforts need to be intensified by broadcasters to educate the public on the harmful effects of climate change.

Welcoming guests to the ceremony that had the creme de la creme in attendance, Chairman of RATAWU, EBS Chapter Comrade Christopher Edo, said members of the union will continue to serve the information needs of the populace by feeding them with useful broadcast items that helps to build a well informed people and society.

High points of the occasion was the presentation of awards to deserving personalities which included the General Manager of Edo Broadcasting Service Mr Suleiman Aledeh.

COURTESY VISIT:

Vice President Kashim Shettima (middle); President of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Comrade Joe Ajaero (5th left); Minister of Labour and Employment, Alhaji Muhammad Dingyadi (6th left); Director-General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Mr Gilbert Hounbo (5th right), and other government dignitaries and labour stakeholders, during a courtesy visit of ILO team to the Presidential Villa, Abuja.

EDOHC DG champions EDSG's healthcare vision

The Director General of the Edo State Health Insurance Commission (EDOHC), Mrs. Augusta Ikpea-Enaholo, has reaffirmed her commitment to ensuring accessible and quality healthcare for vulnerable populations in Edo State.

She led an inspection team on a tour of key health facilities in Edo Central Senatorial District, marking the commencement of the second phase of the front-loading program under the State Equity Plan and Basic Healthcare Provision Fund (BHCPF).

The inspection began at the

EDOHI operations office in Ekpoma, where Mrs. Ikpea-Enaholo met with the district's Head of Operations. She emphasized the importance of teamwork in delivering the agency's mandate, urging staff to remain dedicated to improving healthcare services.

During the tour, she addressed operational challenges across several healthcare facilities. At Ukpenu Primary Healthcare Centre (PHC), the Matron reported delays in accessing funds for essential drugs due to pending updates on account signatories. The DG assured the facility that the matter would be

swiftly resolved.

At Ujoelen PHC in Ekpoma, she identified bureaucratic hurdles that hindered the effective utilization of commission funds, impacting service delivery. Similarly, at Obeidu PHC, the Matron highlighted low community enrollment in the health insurance scheme. Mrs. Ikpea-Enaholo advised that a collaborative effort with the Ward Development Committee would be necessary to enhance community sensitization and participation.

The highlight of the tour was the visit to the Model Primary Healthcare Centre in Irrua,

which will serve as the venue for an upcoming event marking the Governor's 100 Days in Office.

From February 16 to 18, 2025, over one hundred vulnerable individuals will be registered into the health insurance scheme as part of the administration's commitment to inclusive healthcare access.

By spearheading this initiative, Mrs. Ikpea-Enaholo is ensuring that the Governor's healthcare vision translates into practical improvements for Edo residents, addressing operational challenges while reinforcing the government's dedication to the well-being of its people.

First Lady's office reaffirms support for cultural heritage

The Coordinator of the Office of the First Lady, Mrs. Edesili Okpebholo Anani, has commended the Aigubasimwin Movement for its dedication to promoting Edo State's rich cultural heritage.

During a courtesy visit by representatives of the movement to Government House, Benin City, Mrs. Anani expressed her appreciation for the group's efforts in preserving Edo culture and traditions.

"It is good to know that we have people committed to our culture and heritage. Edo State is known as the heartbeat of

the nation, rich in tradition. It is commendable that young people are showing interest in their roots," she stated.

Reaffirming the Governor Monday Okpebholo-led administration's commitment to the people, Mrs. Anani emphasized the government's servant-leadership style.

"We are here to serve. The leadership of this administration, under distinguished Senator Monday Okpebholo, is about service to the people. He listens and acts on their needs. His humility is real, and that is who he is," she assured.

Mrs. Anani pledged her office's support for the movement's initiatives, noting that once the budget review was completed, her office would explore areas for funding assistance. She also praised the movement's efforts in promoting culture and empowering individuals, recognizing that a productive society helps reduce social challenges.

She further acknowledged the esteemed role of His Royal Majesty, the Oba of Benin, highlighting his spiritual and cultural significance.

Speaking on behalf of the movement, Mr. Iyamu Osa-

ro Culture, its leader, praised Mrs. Anani for her accessibility and dedication to her office.

"We congratulate you on your assumption of office. Your approach to leadership is inspiring, and we hope other political office holders will emulate your style. If we had more leaders like you, Edo State would be a better place," he said.

The Aigubasimwin Movement also sought collaboration with the Office of the First Lady to support a two-month entrepreneurship workshop in honor of His Royal Majesty, the Oba of Benin.

Senate seeks inclusion of North-East in FGs N4.2trn road infrastructure project

CAROLINE AMEH

The Nigerian Senate is seeking the inclusion of roads in the North-East in the federal government's road infrastructure project across the country as it also lauded the approval of N4.2 trillion for the construction of the Lagos-Calabar coast-

al highway and several other major road projects across the country by the federal government.

Recall that the approval for the project was granted at the Federal Executive Council (FEC) meeting on February 3, 2025, and aligns with the administration's commitment to rehabilitate the country's

decrepit federal road network under the leadership of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, GCFR.

The call was made in a motion sponsored by Senator Mohammed Danjuma Goje (Gombe Central), who emphasized the urgent need for additional roads rehabilitation in the region.

He highlighted critical road networks in Bauchi, Gombe, Yobe, Adamawa, and Borno States, including the Bauchi-Gombe, Potiskum-Gombe, Yola-Mubi, and Biu-Damaturu roads, which remain in deplorable condition.

While commending the initiative, lawmakers raised concerns over the minimal alloca-

tion to the North-East, which received only two projects.

The Senate emphasized that improving road networks nationwide would not only enhance transportation and trade but also curb insecurity by making highways less vulnerable to criminal activities.

The Senate therefore urged the federal government to rehabilitate all dilapidated federal roads across the country and extend the Renewed Hope Super Highway Project to the North-East, ensuring the region is fully integrated into Nigeria's economic activities.



COURTESY VISIT:

Commissioner, Edo State Ministry of Information and Communication, Hon. Paul Ohonbamu (right), and the Permanent of the Ministry, Dr. Desmond Agbama, during a courtesy visit to the ministry by the management staff of Bendel Newspapers Company Limited, publishers of the *Observer* titles.

Edo govt launches back-to-farm initiative

IDAHOSA MUSA

Edo state Government has launched an aggressive agriculture initiative code named "back-to-farm" in its bid to boost food production across the three senatorial districts of the State.

The State Governor, Senator Monday Okpebholo made this known while meeting with farmers at the Iguoriakhi Farm Settlement, in Ovia South West Local Area of the State.

The back-to-farm initiative is an agricultural revolution in the State, as the Okpebholo administration plans to establish farm settlements in the three senatorial districts of the State, as well as provide farmers with

the needed incentives to produce more food for the nation.

The Governor said that Edo people are known for farming and assured the people that his administration would revive farming across the State to produce food for Edo citizens, Nigeria, as well as export to other States and countries.

He assured that his back-to-farm initiative will not just be on paper, but on the field and Nigerians will enjoy the benefits of abundant food production.

Governor Okpebholo promised the farmers incentives, such as fertilizers, farm machineries for mechanized farming, as well as loans to enable them to carry out the farming activities.

"I want to thank the farmers because they have been farming before, but this time, we will farm together. We want to produce food that will not only feed Edo State, but also feed Nigeria.

"It's time for all of us to go back to the farm. Farming has become a very serious business and together we will produce the food and feed our people.

"My administration will provide you with equipment, fertilizers and support with resources to farm and produce food for the nation.

"We will have farms across the three Senatorial Districts of the State. This is the season to farm and we are embarking on a farm initiative in Edo State," Governor Okpebholo emphasized.

Also speaking during the meeting, the permanent secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and food Security, Dr. Osagie Aibuede, assured farmers that with an increased budget of over N70 billion, farmers will greatly benefit from improved incentives to boost their farming activities.

Earlier, Vice president of the Farmers Association, Mr Benson Enahikare who read the President's speech, outlined some of the challenges facing the farmers, to include encroachment of cattle that destroy their crops.

The 2,300 hectares of farm land known as the Iguoriakhi farm settlement was established in 1963.

Court adjourns Ugwash-Uku 5 case to April 3 over amended charges

FRIDAY OBANOR

ASABA

A Federal High Court sitting in Asaba has adjourned the trial of five Ugwash-Uku leaders to April 3, 2025, following the prosecution's failure to serve amended charges on the fifth defendant.

The defendants, Francis Okolie (National Legal Adviser), Prince Eugene Ojo Izediunor

Agidiase (Youth President), John Nwona (Secretary General, Ugwash-Uku Development Union), Adigwr Elumunor, and Chief Michael Nwaukomi (Iyase of Ugwash-Uku) are facing charges of alleged terrorism, attempted murder, and malicious damage in suit number FHC/ASB/18c/24.

Prosecuting counsel Orji Kalu informed the court that the charges had been amended to include Chief Michael

Nwaukomi.

However, the failure to serve the amended charge on the fifth defendant led to objections from the defense.

Counsel to the fifth defendant, Mr. Chioma Ukwuanyi, argued that the amended charge must be accompanied by proof of evidence, as required by law in criminal cases.

The prosecution conceded and assured the court that all necessary documents would be

filed before the next hearing.

Meanwhile, Chief Albert Akpomudje (SAN), counsel for the second defendant, highlighted inconsistencies in the prosecution's case, revealing the existence of two different amended charges in the case file.

In response, the presiding judge, Justice Olufunmilola Agbaje, adjourned the case to April 3, 2025, to resolve the issues raised and proceed with the trial.

DESOPADEC boss Nani inspects projects in Oghara, Jesse, assures of timely completion

AJUWA VICTOR

The Chairman of the Delta State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (DESOPADEC), Olorogun Barr. John Nani, has reassured residents of oil-bearing communities of the Commission's unwavering commitment to completing ongoing projects within the mandate areas as scheduled.

This assurance was given during an inspection tour of DESOPADEC infrastructural projects in Oghara and Jesse in Ethiope West Local Government Area, where he joined by the Commissioner representing Ethiope West, Sapele, and Okpe Local Government Areas on the DESOPADEC Board, Hon. Julius Egbedi to assess the progress of various initiatives designed to enhance the well-being of the people.

Speaking after the inspection, Chief Nani reiterated Governor Sheriff Oborevwori's commitment to infrastructural development in a sustainable manner that guarantees the attainment of the M.O.R.E. Agenda, emphasizing that DESOPADEC remains dedi-

cated to delivering high-quality projects that will have lasting impacts on communities.

"We are here to ensure that the projects being executed by DESOPADEC align with the vision of the Governor who is determined to bring development to all parts of Delta State. Our visit today is to assess progress and ensure that contractors adhere to stipulated timelines and quality standards as outlined in their Bills of Engineering Measurements and Evaluations (BEME)," Nani stated.

He said the Commission has also awarded the Second phase of the construction of Engr. Vote Street, Oghara and that in a few months, DESOPADEC would commence the commissioning of several completed projects, assuring that the ongoing inspection exercise will extend to Sapele and Okpe LGAs in the coming weeks to ensure compliance to projects specifications.

Chief Nani also called on communities to safeguard DESOPADEC projects and other government interventions, stressing that their protection would encourage the government to do more for them.

Obi Afamefuna lauds Oborevwori's respect for traditional rulers

AJUWA VICTOR

The Obi of Ubulu Uno Kingdom in Aniocha South Local Government Area and 2nd Vice Chairman of Delta Traditional Rulers' Council, His Royal Majesty, Obi Henry Afamefuna Kikachukwu says Governor Sheriff Oborevwori has shown competence in governing the state and has respected royal fathers with uncommon reverence.

Obi Kikachukwu in an interview with newsmen in his Palace at Ubulu Uno, described Governor Oborevwori as a good listener with due regard for the feelings and rights of others.

The Anioma monarch said the governor possessed a tolerant liberal character and fair conscience which according to him were "the key qualities of a competent leader"

"What interests me most is that we have a governor that has tremendous respect for

tradition. The governor I know is a governor that has respect for Royal Fathers. Governor Oborevwori comes across very respectful.

He is thoughtful in decision making and exhibits fairness in dealing with the people in a complex state like Delta.

"He keeps promises. A governor who is fulfilling his pledges to Deltans. He is implementing his development plan called M.O.R.E agenda.

"We can see infrastructure development in Delta, we can see economic development, human capital development, environmental sustainability and what have you.

"If you look closely at his agenda, you will discover that in the three senatorial districts he has lived up to expectations. Some of the projects had already been awarded and ongoing. I know he will want them to deliver a good job. That's why he is always out inspecting the projects."

NEWS

MTN begs Nigerians over 200% data bundle hike

MTN Nigeria has publicly apologized to its customers following widespread backlash over a sudden 200% increase in the price of its 15GB digital bundle plan.

The telecommunications giant admitted the adjustment was an error and assured

subscribers of better decision-making in the future.

In a statement posted on its official Instagram handle on Thursday, MTN acknowledged the frustration caused by the price hike.

"You dey vex. We know," the company stated, recognizing the anger among its users. "We

know how upsetting it must have been to suddenly wake up to a 200% increase on your favourite digital bundle."

While the company refrained from offering detailed explanations, it accepted responsibility for the pricing change.

"We could share several reasons, and provide explanations, but omo, all that one

na story. We don cast. We get it and admit it. Let's just say na mistake," the statement read.

In a bid to mend its relationship with customers, MTN appealed for forgiveness, particularly during the Valentine's season, emphasizing its appreciation for loyal subscribers.

"In this love season, don't stay angry with us. Please forgive and forget. You matter die,

and we will never stop showing you how much," the statement continued.

The company concluded by reaffirming its commitment to customer satisfaction. "Let's continue our relationship. Thank you for your understanding."

MTN's apology comes amid growing concerns over rising data costs and telecom services

in Nigeria.

The sudden price hike, which raised the cost of a 15GB weekly data plan from N2,000 to N6,000—a 200% increase—caught many internet subscribers off guard and sparked widespread outrage on social media on Wednesday.

The statement, however, did not mention whether the tariff had been reduced.

Edo govt advances schools renovations under 100-day agenda

Extensive school renovations and reconstruction efforts are underway across Edo State as part of the governor's commitment to delivering quality education.

The initiative aims to provide safe, modern learning environments to enhance student learning and development.

As part of ongoing oversight, the Executive Chairman of the Edo State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), Barr. Mrs. Onomen Briggs, led an inspection tour of the Edo Central Senatorial District.

She was accompanied by Board Member, Chief Christopher Abuya and Engr. Martin Amune.

This visit followed a similar tour in the Edo South Senatorial District earlier in the week, reinforcing the state's dedication to ensuring project completion and quality standards.

During the inspection, the team assessed progress at different schools. At Ebhoakhuala Primary School in Ebhoakhuala (Ekpoma), the site engineer, Mr. Samson Walter, and Headmistress, Mrs. Umoera Beatrice,

presented a newly constructed block featuring six classrooms, an office, and a toilet facility.

Similarly, at Eko-Omigie Primary School in Urohi (Esan West), the team inspected a completed block of four classrooms and an office awaiting furnishings.

Renovations at Atani Primary School and Egbele Primary School in Uromi were also reviewed.

Expressing satisfaction with the quality of work in Edo Central, Executive Chairman Briggs noted that the progress exceeded what had been observed during the Edo South tour.

She emphasized the importance of regular inspections to ensure the timely execution of the governor's ambitious plan to renovate and reconstruct over 100 schools within his first 100 days in office.

She further confirmed that commissioning of the completed buildings would commence in the coming weeks, marking a significant milestone in Edo State's ongoing commitment to improving basic education infrastructure.

Oba Ewuare II approves 'Ewu Iwu' dress for social events

IDAHOUSA MUSA

BENIN CITY

The Oba of Benin, His Royal Majesty, Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Ewuare II, has reaffirmed the ban on the use of Okuku (Benin traditional hairdo), Ada (scepter), and Eben (scimitar) by unauthorized individuals during social events in Benin.

However, the revered monarch has approved the Ewu Iwu attire as the appropriate dress for Benin people at social gatherings. The attire must be worn with long coral beads (Udeguogho) but without a red bottom or any adornments featuring the symbols of the leopard, sun, moon, star, or palm tree.

It would be recalled that Oba Ewuare II recently prohibited the use of royal paraphernalia at social ceremonies and granted Benin chiefs, priests, and priestesses the authority to place curses on defaulters.

Speaking on behalf of the Benin Traditional Council (BTC) in a statement issued on Thursday in Benin, Chief Norense Ozigbo-Esere, the Osuna of Benin, emphasized that

the Okuku hairdo is exclusively reserved for the Queens of the Oba of Benin and should not be worn by any other women.

He explained that the various elements of the Okuku hairdo hold deep religious and cultural significance that cannot be disclosed to the uninitiated. Despite its aesthetic appeal, it is not merely a decorative style.

Reading from the statement signed by himself, Chief Edionwe Oliha (Oliha of Benin), and five other palace chiefs, Chief Osuma declared: "Following appeals from Benin sons and daughters at home and in the Diaspora for clarification on the use of traditional paraphernalia, His Royal Majesty, Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Ewuare II, CFR, Oba of Benin, has directed that this press statement be issued to further enlighten the general public.

"The Okuku hairdo is strictly reserved for the Queens of the Oba of Benin and is not permitted for use by any other women. The various elements seen on the Okuku carry religious and cultural significance, which cannot be explained to the uninitiated. They are not mere decorations, despite their aesthetic appeal."



STUDY TOUR:

Labour Party (LP) Presidential Candidate, in the 2023 General Elections, Mr Peter Obi (right), during a chat with the former President of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, in Solo, Indonesia, as part of Obi's study tour of the country.

CBN retains N100 ATM fee for withdrawals below N20,000

The Central Bank of Nigeria has announced that Nigerians withdrawing less than N20,000 from another bank's Automated Teller Machine will still be charged a fee of N100 per transaction.

This is according to a FAQ document published by the apex bank on its website on Thursday, which provides further information on a new CBN's directive.

The directive is part of the newly revised ATM transaction fees set to take effect from March 1, 2025, as contained in the CBN circular dated February 10, 2025.

Under the revised fee structure, withdrawals from one's bank ATMs will remain free of charge.

However, customers using ATMs of other banks will be subjected to a charge of N100 per withdrawal of N20,000 or less at on-site ATMs, which are located within or directly affiliated with a bank branch.

Off-site ATMs, which are positioned outside bank premises such as shopping malls, fuel stations, and other public spaces, will attract an additional surcharge of up to N500 per transaction.

For international ATM withdrawals, charges will be based on cost recovery, meaning customers will bear the exact fee applied by the international acquirer.

The CBN stated that the charge on withdrawals below N20,000 is intended to prevent customers from splitting withdrawals into smaller amounts to avoid fees.

The FAQ document read, "Yes, the fee of N100 will apply if you withdraw less than N20,000 from another bank (a bank other than the one that issued your payment card).

"The reason for applying the fee for every N20,000 withdrawal is to prevent customers from being compelled to break their withdrawals to less than

N20,000 per withdrawal.

"In other words, ATM transactions will incur a base fee of N100 per transaction. It is also important to note that a tiered fee structure will apply for transactions exceeding N20,000, with an additional N100 charged for each subsequent withdrawal of N20,000 or portion thereof."

Customers withdrawing more than N20,000 from another bank's ATM will be charged an additional N100 for every subsequent N20,000 or portion thereof.

Another significant change in the revised structure is the removal of the three free monthly withdrawals previously allowed for customers using other banks' ATMs.

From March 1, 2025, all withdrawals at another bank's ATM will attract charges, potentially increasing costs for customers who frequently use ATMs outside their primary bank.

The apex bank has clarified that financial institutions are not permitted to charge more than the prescribed fees, although banks may reduce charges depending on their business strategy.

Any bank found in violation of the directive, including compelling customers to withdraw less than N20,000 per transaction despite sufficient funds in their account, will be sanctioned accordingly.

Customers who experience such restrictions are encouraged to report complaints to the CBN Consumer Protection Department via cpd@cbn.gov.ng.

To minimise transaction fees, the CBN has advised customers to prioritise withdrawals from their bank's own ATMs.

It also encouraged Nigerians to explore alternative payment methods such as mobile banking applications, POS transactions, and electronic transfers to reduce reliance on cash withdrawals.

Tinubu congratulates Wale Oke on re-election as PFN President

President Bola Tinubu has congratulated Bishop Francis Wale Oke on his re-election as the National President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria.

This was contained in a statement signed by the Special Adviser to the President on Information and Strategy, Bayo

Onanuga, on Thursday.

Oke, who founded Sword of the Spirit Ministries International in 1983, was re-elected during the 18th Biennial National Conference of the PFN held in Abuja.

"President Tinubu also congratulates the Christian faithful and commends Bishop Oke for

his consistent effort in promoting religious harmony and national renaissance, as demonstrated in his 'Nigeria Turning Point Prayer Movement.'

"The President describes the renowned clergyman as a man of fine character, principle, and faith and encourages him to continue using the pulpit to teach

the good gospel of love, kindness, and peace as embodied by Jesus Christ," the statement read.

Tinubu also offered prayers for a renewed anointing of Oke as he continues his leadership in the Christian community.

Oke was first elected PFN National President in 2021 after serving as Deputy President.

FridaySermoon

The Weight of Amaana (Trust)

MALLAM HARUN UMAR

Assalamualaikum warahmatullah wabarakatuh.

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. All praise is due to Allah alone, the Lord of all worlds. May His peace and blessings be upon our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), his family, his companions, and those who follow his path until the Day of Judgment.

We are grateful to Allah for allowing us to witness another Friday, a day of immense significance and spiritual reflection.

Today, we look into a topic of paramount importance in Islam: Amaana. Amaana, an Arabic word, encompasses a wide range of meanings, including trust, honesty, integrity, faithfulness, reliability, and loyalty. It represents the bedrock of our relationships, the foundation of a just and harmonious society and a critical component of our faith. Amaana is not merely a word; it is a way of life, a principle that should govern our every action and interaction.

The essence of Amaana stems from the root word "amn," signifying security, tranquility, and peace. When we embody Amaana, we create an environment of trust, where individuals feel safe, respected, and valued. Conversely, the absence of Amaana breeds suspicion, distrust, and ultimately, chaos.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the epitome of trustworthiness, emphasized the significance of Amaana in numerous narrations. He exemplified this virtue in every aspect of his life, earning the title "Al-Amin" (the trustworthy) even before his prophethood. His teachings and actions serve as a beacon, illuminating the path to righteousness and guiding us towards a life of integrity.

In a powerful hadith narrated by Ibn Hibban, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "Whoever does not possess Amaana has no faith." This profound statement underscores the inseparable link between faith and trustworthiness. A person who betrays trust, who is dishonest in their dealings, or who fails to fulfill their obligations, demonstrates a deficiency in their faith. Such individuals may outwardly profess their belief, but their actions betray a lack of genuine conviction.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) further elaborated on the characteristics of those who lack Amaana,

saying, "The signs of a hypocrite are three: When he speaks, he lies; when he makes a promise, he breaks it; and when he is entrusted with something, he betrays it." These are stark warnings, urging us to examine our own conduct and ensure that we are not exhibiting these reprehensible traits.

Amaana permeates every facet of our lives, from the most personal relationships to the broader societal interactions. It exists between spouses, binding them in a bond of love, respect, and mutual trust. It exists between neighbours, fostering a sense of community and cooperation. It exists between leaders and their followers, creating a relationship of accountability and responsibility. It even exists within ourselves, requiring us to be honest with ourselves and to live in accordance with our conscience.

Consider the relationship between husband and wife. Amaana demands that both partners be faithful and loyal to each other, respecting the sanctity of their marriage. Infidelity, whether physical or emotional, is a grave betrayal of trust, shattering the foundation of the family unit. Similarly, spouses must be honest and transparent in their communication, sharing their thoughts and feelings openly and truthfully. Secrets and deception erode trust, creating distance and resentment.

Trust is equally crucial in our interactions with our neighbours. We must treat them with kindness and respect, refraining from any actions that might cause them harm or discomfort. We should be mindful of their property, avoiding any encroachment or damage. We should also be supportive and helpful, offering assistance when they are in need. A strong and harmonious community is built on a foundation of trust and mutual respect.

The relationship between leaders and followers is also governed by the principle of Amaana. Leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of serving their people, acting in their best interests, and upholding justice and fairness. They must be transparent in their decision-making, accountable for their actions, and dedicated to the welfare of their community. When leaders betray the trust placed in them, they undermine the very fabric of society and create an environment of cynicism and distrust.

Amaana extends beyond our interpersonal relationships to encompass our professional lives as well. Employees are entrusted with the responsibility of fulfilling their duties diligently and honestly. They must be punctual,

productive, and respectful of their colleagues and superiors. They should also safeguard confidential information and avoid any actions that could harm the company's reputation. Employers, in turn, must treat their employees fairly, providing them with just compensation and a safe working environment.

In the realm of business, Amaana is essential for fostering trust between buyers and sellers. Merchants should be honest in their dealings, accurately representing the quality and price of their goods. They should avoid any deceptive practices, such as misleading advertisements or inflated prices. Buyers, on the other hand, should be honest in their transactions, paying promptly and fulfilling their contractual obligations.

Amaana also plays a vital role in the administration of justice. Judges are entrusted with the responsibility of upholding the law and ensuring that justice is served. They must be impartial, fair, and free from bias. Lawyers have a duty to represent their clients to the best of their ability, while upholding the principles of justice and fairness. Witnesses must testify truthfully, providing accurate and unbiased accounts of the events they have witnessed. When these individuals fail to uphold their responsibilities, they undermine the integrity of the justice system and erode public trust.

The Quran and Sunnah are replete with examples of the importance of Amaana. Allah (SWT) says in Surah Al-Mu'minun (23:8), "And those who are faithful to their trusts and to their covenants." This verse highlights the importance of fulfilling our obligations and honouring our commitments.

In addition to the fear of Allah (SWT), we must also strengthen our commitment to the principles of justice and fairness. We must strive to create a society where everyone is treated with respect and dignity, where the rights of all are protected, and where justice prevails. This requires us to be vigilant against injustice, to speak out against wrongdoing, and to work towards creating a more just and equitable society

In another verse, Allah (SWT) says in Surah Al-Anfal (8:27), "O you who have believed, do not betray Allah and the Messenger and do not betray your trusts while you know [the consequences]." This verse serves as a stern warning against betraying trust, emphasizing the severe consequences of such actions.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "The believer is the one from whose tongue and hand the Muslims are safe, and the Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand other Muslims are safe." This hadith emphasizes the importance of being trustworthy in our words and actions, ensuring that we do not harm or deceive others.

He also said, "Truthfulness leads to righteousness, and righteousness leads to Paradise. And a man keeps on telling the truth until he becomes a truthful person. Falsehood leads to Al-Fajur (i.e., wickedness, evil-doing), and Al-Fajur (wickedness) leads to the (Hell) Fire, and a man may keep on telling lies till he is written before Allah, a liar." This hadith highlights the importance of being truthful in all our dealings, as truthfulness is a key component of Amaana.

The consequences of betraying trust are severe, both in this world and in the hereafter. In this world, betrayal of trust can lead to broken relationships, loss of reputation, and financial ruin. In the hereafter, those who betray trust will face the wrath of Allah (SWT).

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "Every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The leader of the people is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The man is the shepherd of his family and is re-

sponsible for his flock. The woman is the shepherd of her husband's house and is responsible for her flock. The servant is the shepherd of his master's property and is responsible for it. So, all of you are shepherds and are responsible for your flocks." This hadith illustrates the pervasive nature of responsibility and trust, extending to every member of society. Each of us is a custodian of something, whether it be our family, our work, or our community, and we will be held accountable for how we discharge that trust.

The erosion of Amaana in our society is a matter of grave concern. We see examples of this all around us, from broken promises and dishonest dealings to corruption and abuse of power. This decline in trustworthiness has far-reaching consequences, undermining social cohesion, eroding public confidence, and hindering progress.

The restoration of Amaana must begin with each and every one of us. We must strive to embody the virtues of honesty, integrity, and faithfulness in all our interactions. We must be mindful of our words and actions, ensuring that they are in accordance with the principles of Islam. We must also hold others accountable for their actions, speaking out against injustice and corruption.

The fear of Allah (SWT) is the most powerful motivator for upholding Amaana. When we are conscious of Allah's presence and aware that we will be held accountable for our actions, we are more likely to be honest and trustworthy. This consciousness should permeate every aspect of our lives, guiding our decisions and shaping our behaviour.

In addition to the fear of Allah (SWT), we must also strengthen our commitment to the principles of justice and fairness. We must strive to create a society where everyone is treated with respect and dignity, where the rights of all are protected, and where justice prevails. This requires us to be vigilant against injustice, to speak out against wrongdoing, and to work towards creating a more just and equitable society.

The education and upbringing of our children play a crucial role in instilling the values of Amaana. We must teach them. May Allah grant us the best always.

Mallam Harun Umar writes from the Edo State Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board's Central Mosque Benin City.

The Warri prison robbery syndicate: A blot on justice

«CONTINUED FROM BACK PAGE

tation rather than mere holding cells for criminal enterprises.

While the Warri prison scandal is shocking, it is hardly surprising. Nigeria's security system has long been compromised, and criminals are increasingly finding ways to exploit its weaknesses. The correctional system, police force, and even elements within the judiciary

have been accused of colluding with criminals for personal gain.

A country where criminals can operate from within prison walls with the active support of those meant to guard them is a country teetering on the brink of lawlessness. If this situation is not decisively addressed, it will only be a matter of time before other correctional facilities across the country replicate the same criminal model,

further plunging the nation into chaos.

The Warri prison scandal is a wake-up call for the Nigerian government and all stakeholders in the criminal justice system. It is time for serious action, not just empty rhetoric. If drastic measures are not taken to sanitise the correctional system, the entire country will continue to suffer the consequences of a security apparatus that breeds rather than curtails crime.

The National Assembly, the Ministry of Interior, and other relevant agencies must move beyond mere investigations and enact real, actionable reforms to prevent future occurrences. Justice must be swift, transparent, and uncompromising. The correctional officers who enabled this atrocity must be made an example to deter others.

Nigeria can not afford to nor-

malise such brazenness in its criminal justice system. If prisons are no longer secure, then where is safe? The people deserve answers, and more importantly, they deserve justice.

Odaro, a columnist, lectures in the Department of Mass Communication, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi.

Fashion&Style

The rise of crochet fashion in Nigeria

OSAMUDIAME AGBONGIASEDE

Once a niche hobby associated with Home Economics classes, crocheting has become a prominent trend in the Nigerian fashion industry. Known for its versatility in design and color, crochet is now a popular method for creating stylish and durable clothing items, including hats, sweaters, socks, bikinis, blouses, and beanies.

Crochet's appeal lies not only in its creativity but also in its practicality. Crochet pieces are just as durable and functional as mass-produced textiles, and they can be suited to vari-

ous weather conditions. For instance, lightweight crochet bikinis and sheer tops are perfect for the dry, sunny harmattan season, while thicker items like sweaters and beanies are ideal for the rainy, cooler months.

In Nigeria, fashion is ever-evolving, and in recent years, crocheted garments have been embraced by both celebrities and everyday Nigerians. These pieces, often designed in intricate patchwork or colorful patterns, are worn with other crocheted items or paired with factory-made clothes, jewelry, and footwear.

What was once a simple pastime has now become a booming business

in Nigeria, particularly among young people. Handmade crocheted clothing is gaining traction as both a fashion statement and a source of income, signaling a shift toward a sustainable, artisanal approach to fashion.

Popular crochet designers on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, such as Crochet Creator, Crochet Hashira, and Crochet Designer, have played a key role in boosting the demand for crocheted fashion. Despite the higher cost of handmade items, Nigerian youth are increasingly eager to purchase and style these one-of-a-kind pieces, making crochet a long-lasting trend in the Nigerian fashion scene.



Entertainment

Nollywood's 'Reel Love' gears up for a romantic Valentine's Day premiere

UGO UGBOH

Get ready for a heartwarming cinematic experience as *Reel Love*—Nollywood's latest romantic drama—prepares to hit the big screen just in time for Valentine's Day! Co-produced by beloved actor Timini Egbuson, renowned filmmaker Kayode Kasum, and FilmOne Studios, the film was premiered in Lagos on Sunday, February 9, 2025, before its nationwide release on Friday, February 14.

With love, passion, and unexpected twists at its core, *Reel Love* promises to take audiences on an emotional rollercoaster. The film tells a gripping story of love, culture, and self-discovery, with a compelling love triangle that will keep viewers hooked from start to finish.

Adding to the excitement, the movie features an all-star cast, including Nollywood icons Funke Akindele, Dakore Akande, Muyiwa Ademola, Shaffy Bello, Bimbo Ademoye, and Efa Iwara. Rising talent T.J. Omusuku makes her much-anticipated debut in a lead role, bringing fresh energy to the screen.

Timini Egbuson, who not only stars in the film but also plays a key role in its production, expressed his

excitement:

This project is deeply personal to me, marking an exciting new chapter in my career. I'm incredibly proud to bring this story to life with such a talented team. *Reel Love* is more than just a film; it's an experience that celebrates the complexities of love and how it can flourish in unexpected ways."

Directed by Kayode Kasum—known for hit films like *Ajosepo*, *Something Like Gold*, *Dwindle*, and *Ponzi*—*Reel Love* is expected to be a visual and emotional masterpiece. Kasum's expertise in storytelling, combined with Egbuson's passion, sets the stage for a must-watch movie that will leave audiences talking.

As Nollywood continues to grow internationally, *Reel Love* is another step toward high-quality storytelling and production. With its strong cast, emotional storyline, and talented crew, the film is set to be one of the most talked-about romantic movies of the year. Whether you're a die-hard romantic or just looking for a great movie to watch with your partner or friends for valentine, this is one you won't want to miss!

Mark your calendars—*Reel Love* hits cinemas nationwide on February 14, 2025!



BIGGEST SOCIAL MEDIA TREND OF THE WEEK

Hon. Natasha Osawaru says **YES** to Innocent Idibia (Tuface)?



Foreign

News

Ukraine war talks start now, Trump says after Putin call

US President Donald Trump has said he had a “lengthy and highly productive” phone call with Vladimir Putin on Wednesday in which the leaders agreed to begin negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.

In a post on his Truth Social platform, Trump said he and the Russian president had “agreed to have our respective teams start negotiations immediately”.

Later, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he had spoken with Trump about a “lasting, reliable peace”.

The calls with the warring sides came as both Trump and his defence secretary said it was unlikely Ukraine would join Nato, which will come as

a bitter disappointment to Kyiv.

Zelensky said he would meet Vice-President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio during a defence summit on Ukraine in Munich on Friday.

Trump wrote on social media: “It is time to stop this ridiculous War, where there has been massive, and totally unnecessary, DEATH and DESTRUCTION. God bless the people of Russia and Ukraine!”

He did not set a date for a face-to-face meeting with Putin, but later told reporters at the White House: “We’ll meet in Saudi Arabia.” He wrote on social media the pair had also invited each other to their respective capitals.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Putin supported

Trump’s idea that the time had come to work together.

The phone call between Putin and Trump lasted nearly an hour-and-a-half, during which the Russian president extended an invitation to visit Moscow, Peskov said.

Trump also told reporters at the White House that it was unlikely Ukraine would return to its pre-2014 borders but, in response to a question from the BBC, he said “some of that land will come back”.

The president said he agreed with his Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, who told a Nato summit earlier on Wednesday that there was no likelihood of Ukraine joining the military alliance.

Later on Wednesday, seven European countries including

Britain, France and Germany insisted they be part of any future negotiations on Ukraine’s fate.

“Our shared objectives should be to put Ukraine in a position of strength,” read the joint statement released after a meeting of foreign ministers in Paris.

“Ukraine and Europe must be part of any negotiations.”

They called for strong security guarantees for Ukraine and said they were looking forward to discussing the way forward with their American allies.

While it has long been known the new US administration would be less sympathetic to Ukraine than its predecessor, the words from Trump and his Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth will have only pleased Moscow.

Confusion clouds efforts to save Gaza ceasefire

The Gaza ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas has looked shaky since it came into force on 19 January but now looks the closest yet to totally falling apart.

A senior Egyptian source told the BBC that regional mediators Egypt and Qatar were “intensifying their diplomatic efforts in an attempt to salvage the ceasefire agreement”.

A top-level Hamas delegation has now arrived in Cairo for talks “to contain the current crisis”, a Hamas official told the BBC. He reiterated his group’s “full commitment” to the terms of the deal.

On Tuesday, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said: “If Hamas does not return our hostages by Saturday noon, the ceasefire will end and the [Israeli military] will resume intense fighting.”

However, there has been mixed messaging on whether he means all 76 hostages still in Gaza - in line with the high-stakes ultimatum recommended by US President Donald Trump.

Trump was reacting to a Hamas threat to derail the agreement on Monday.

It complained of Israeli ceasefire violations, in particular relating to aid, and warned that it would delay the release of hostages on Saturday.

In the past week, the president’s new radical plan for a US takeover of Gaza - without its two million Palestinian residents - has also changed the context for the ceasefire which his administration helped to

broker.

On Wednesday, the White House restated Trump’s plan, while admitting that Jordan’s King Abdullah II had rejected the idea during talks in Washington a day earlier.

“The king would much prefer that the Palestinians stay in place,” White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said. “But the president feels it would be much better and more majestic if these Palestinians could be moved to safer areas.”

So, what more do we know about what has been happening behind the scenes?

When it comes to the outcome of the four-hour Israeli security cabinet meeting on Tuesday, Israeli journalists admitted puzzlement over contradictory and confusing briefings.

After the Israeli prime minister’s video message demanded the release of “our” hostages, the first reports - quoting an unnamed senior Israeli official - said this referred to the original three male hostages scheduled to be freed.

It was then said that Israel expected the final nine living hostages slated for release in the six-week first phase of the ceasefire to be freed, which is supposed to see a total of 33 captives handed over.

Key ministers then began to weigh in. Miri Regev - a close ally of Netanyahu - said on X the decision was “very clear” and echoed the Trump demand. She said: “By Saturday, everyone will be released!”



SCENE IN GRENOBLE:

Dozens of officers were deployed to the scene in Grenoble on Wednesday evening

Hegseth sets out hard line on European defence and Nato

European nations must provide the “overwhelming” share of funding for Ukraine, the new US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth has said, as he signalled a drastic shift in Washington’s position on the war.

Speaking at a defence summit in Brussels, Hegseth said the US would no longer “tolerate an imbalanced relationship” with its allies and called on Nato members to spend much more on defence.

He also said it was “unrealistic” to expect Ukraine to return to its pre-2014 borders and downplayed the prospect of Ukraine joining Nato.

The comments came as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin held a “lengthy” phone call in which they agreed to begin negotiations to end the war.

The new US defence secretary’s remarks are the clearest indication yet of the Trump administration’s position on the Ukraine war and what a peace plan to end the conflict could involve.

The positions set out by Hegseth will be met with dismay in Ukraine - which has repeatedly called for Nato mem-

bership and has rejected ceding territory as part of any peace deal - and will be welcomed by Moscow.

There will also be nervousness across the continent after Hegseth suggested the US would significantly scale back its support for Ukraine, insisting that European nations would now need to provide the “overwhelming share” of aid to Kyiv.

Hegseth, who was appointed defence secretary after Trump returned to the US presidency in January, was speaking at the Ukraine Defence Contact

Group, a meeting of more than 40 countries allied to Ukraine.

He said: “We want, like you, a sovereign and prosperous Ukraine.”

“But we must start by recognising that returning to Ukraine’s pre-2014 borders is an unrealistic objective.”

“Chasing this illusory goal will only prolong the war and cause more suffering.”

Russia annexed the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014 and then backed pro-Russian separatists in an armed insurgency against Kyiv’s forces in eastern

Ukraine.

Moscow currently controls around a fifth of Ukraine’s territory, mainly in the east and south.

Hegseth said any durable peace must include “robust security guarantees to ensure that the war will not begin again”.

However, he said “the United States does not believe that Nato membership for Ukraine is a realistic outcome of a negotiated settlement”.

Instead, security guarantees should be backed by “capable European and non-European troops”.

Trade, tariffs and visas to dominate Trump-Modi talks

When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits Washington and meets President Donald Trump today, there will be some warm hugs and shared laughs. But that will not be all.

Trump and Modi have developed a strong personal rapport over the years, marked by high-profile meetings and joint appearances. This time, they will also hold a joint press briefing, according to the White House.

Since their first meeting

in Washington in 2017, their bond has grown through other events, including joint appearances at massive rallies in Houston and Ahmedabad. Their chemistry stems from shared worldviews and politics and a mutual strategic focus on countering China, a concern that has also strengthened the broader US-India partnership.

Not surprisingly, Trump has often criticised India, but he has never criticised Modi.

And so, during Modi’s visit,

the two leaders will probably spend time mapping out next steps in the US-India strategic partnership, which is already in a good place.

Modi will reportedly meet several members of Trump’s cabinet, as well as US business leaders and members of the Indian-American community.

He may also meet SpaceX and Tesla chief Elon Musk. Modi, keen to scale up India’s burgeoning electric vehicles sector, would be happy if Musk

Grenade attack in French bar injures 12

Twelve people have been injured after a grenade was thrown into a busy bar in the French city of Grenoble, local authorities have said.

The incident happened at the Aksehir bar shortly after 20:00 local time (19:00 GMT) on Wednesday evening, leaving two people in critical condition.

The motive for the attack is not clear but investigators say it “may be linked to a settling of scores”.

Prosecutor Francois Tourette-Courcey said eyewitness accounts suggest the suspect, who is as yet unidentified, may also have been carrying a Kal-

ashnikov assault rifle.

Speaking to reporters at the scene, he said: “There’s nothing to make us think it’s linked to terrorism,” describing the incident as an “act of extreme violence”.

He added that investigators were looking at possible connections to drug trafficking.

Authorities said many people were at the venue, located in the city’s Olympic Village neighbourhood, when the suspect briefly entered.

Some 80 firefighters and police officers were deployed to the scene with the area remaining cordoned off on Thursday morning, French paper Le Figaro reports.

Deputy Mayor Chloe Pantel told the AFP news agency that the venue was “a spot where locals and people from outside the neighbourhood gather, especially to watch football matches”.

Police presence in the area will remain for a while, she added.

Posting on X, Mayor Eric Piolle condemned what he described as a “criminal act of extraordinary violence,” before thanking rescue and security forces “for their rapid intervention”.

opened a Tesla factory in India.

And yet the Trump-Modi conviviality and heady talk of strategic partnership may mask a sobering reality: during Modi’s visit, the relationship’s transactional side will come into sharp relief with each leader, especially Trump, armed with an array of demands.

Delhi knows Trump well. Many of Modi’s current cabinet ministers also served during his previous term, which overlapped with part of the first Trump administration.

News

Foreign

Why India fails to protect its domestic workers despite decades of abuse

Smitha (not her real name), a domestic helper in Delhi for 28 years, can't forget the day she was beaten in public by one of her employers.

The woman had accused Smitha - a Dalit woman from the most discriminated against caste in Hinduism's entrenched social hierarchy - of stealing her daughter's earrings and then refused to pay her. After many requests, I confronted her in public. That's when she started abusing and hitting me. I held her hands to stop the abuse but the guards came and dragged me out of the housing society and locked the gate," Smitha says.

She was eventually paid - a measly 1,000 rupees [\$11; £9] for a month of sweeping, mopping and washing dishes - after a more sympathetic family intervened on her behalf. But she was banned from entering the housing community and did not bother going to the police as she believed they would not take action.

Smitha's story is one among hundreds of thousands of accounts of mistreatment, abuse and sexual assault reported by India's domestic workers. Most are women and many are migrants within the country, belonging to castes that are looked down upon.

Last month, India's Supreme Court raised concerns over their exploitation and asked the federal government to look into creating a law to protect them from abuse.

But this isn't the first time that an attempt has been made to cre-

ate such a legal framework. Despite years of advocacy by various groups and federal ministries, no such law has ever been passed.

Separate bills proposed in 2008 and 2016, aimed at registering domestic workers and improving their working conditions, have not yet been passed. A national policy drafted in 2019 aimed at including domestic workers under existing labour laws has not been implemented.

Sonia George of the Self Employed Women's Association (Sewa), who was part of the task force that formulated the draft policy, calls it one of the "most comprehensive policies for domestic workers" yet, but says that successive governments have failed to implement it.

As a result, India's vast army of domestic helpers must rely on employer goodwill for basics such as wages or leave or even a baseline of respect. According to official statistics, India has 4.75 million domestic workers, including three million women. But the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates the true numbers to be between 20 and 80 million.

"We have a patronising relationship with the help and not a labour employment relationship," says Professor Neetha N from the Centre for Women's Development Studies.

"This maintains the status quo and is one of the biggest hurdles to regulating and legalising domestic work."

As things stand, private homes are not considered to be an es-

tablishment or workplace, so domestic work falls outside the purview of social protections such as minimum wages, the right to safe working conditions, the right to unionise and access to social security schemes.

At least 14 Indian states, including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Kerala, Meghalaya, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, have mandated minimum wages for domestic workers and some federal laws, like India's anti-sexual harassment and child labour laws, include do-

mestic workers in their scope.

But there is very little awareness among domestic workers that they can take advantage of these provisions, Ms George says, adding that the nature of the profession also poses challenges.

Workers are scattered and there is no mechanism to register or even identify them as they generally don't sign any kind of contract with their employers.

"We will need to set up systems to register domestic workers - getting over their 'invisibility' is a big step towards regularising the

profession," she says.

That applies to employers too. "They are completely invisible in the system and hence escape accountability and responsibility," Ms George says.

The caste system also poses further complexities - workers from some castes may agree to clean toilets in a home while others from slightly different castes may not.

Ultimately the whole concept of domestic work should be re-defined, Ms George says. "Domestic work is considered to be

unskilled work but that is not the case in reality. You cannot care for a sick person or cook a meal without being skilled," she adds.

In addition to failing to pass its own laws or implement its own policy, India has also not yet ratified ILO's Convention 189 - a landmark international agreement that aims to ensure that domestic workers have the same rights and protections as other workers. Despite voting in favour of the convention in 2011, India does not yet conform to all its provisions.



PROTESTERS: Domestic workers in India protesting for their rights

Hundreds of foreigners freed from Myanmar's scam centres

More than 250 people from 20 nationalities who had been working in telecom fraud centres in Myanmar's Karen State have been released by an ethnic armed group and brought to Thailand.

The workers, more than half of whom were from African or Asian nations, were received by the Thai army, and are being assessed to find out if they were victims of human trafficking.

Last week Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra met Chinese leader Xi Jinping and promised to shut down the scam centres which have proliferated along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Her government has stopped access to power and fuel from the Thai side of the border, and toughened up banking and visa rules to try to prevent scam operators from using Thailand as a transit country for moving workers and cash.

Some opposition MPs in Thailand have been pushing for this kind of action for the past two years.

Foreign workers are typically lured to these scam centres by offers of good salaries, or in some cases tricked into thinking they will be doing different work in Thailand, not Myanmar.

The scammers look for

workers with skills in the languages of those who are targeted for cyber-fraud, usually English and Chinese.

They are pressed into conducting online criminal activity, ranging from love scams known as "pig butchering" and crypto fraud, to money laundering and illegal gambling.

Some are willing to do the work, but others are forced to stay, with release only possible if their families pay large ransoms. Some of those who have escaped have described being tortured.

The released foreign workers were handed over by the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, DKBA, one of several armed factions which control territory inside Karen State.

These armed groups have been accused of allowing the scam compounds to operate under their protection, and of tolerating the widespread abuse of trafficking victims who are forced to work in the compounds.

The Myanmar government has been unable to extend its control over much of Karen State since independence in 1948.

On Tuesday, Thailand's Department of Special Investigation, which is similar to the US FBI, requested arrest warrants for three commanders of an-

other armed group known as the Karen National Army.

The warrants included Saw Chit Thu, the Karen warlord who struck a deal in 2017 with a Chinese company to build Shwe Kokko, a new city believed to be largely funded by scams.

The BBC visited Shwe Kokko at the invitation of Yatai, the company which built the city.

Yatai says there are no more scams in Shwe Kokko. It has put up huge billboards all over

town proclaiming, in Chinese, Burmese and English, that forced labour is not allowed, and that "online businesses" should leave.

But we were told by local people that the scam business was still running, and interviewed a worker who had been employed in one.

Like the DKBA, Saw Chit Thu broke away from the main Karen insurgent group, the KNU, in 1994, and allied himself to the Myanmar military.

€5m worth of cocaine seized in Kildare

Two men have been arrested following a seizure of €5m (£4m) worth of cocaine in County Kildare.

On Wednesday, gardai (Irish police) stopped and searched a vehicle and a residential property in the Allenwood area of Kildare and approximately 72kg of cocaine was discovered.

The men, aged in their 50s and 60s, were arrested in relation to facilitating and enhancing drug distribution activities for an organised crime group.

They were subsequently charged and are due before Naas District Court on Thursday.

Assistant Commissioner Angela Willis of Organised and Serious Crime said it "is another significant seizure of cocaine destined for the Irish market".

"An Garda Síochána and our law enforcement partners are committed to targeting those engaged in drug related organised crime that leads to harm, intimidation and violence in our communities nationwide."

Trump moves to close entries to government worker buyout programme

The Trump administration has said it will close entries to a programme designed to shrink the number of US government employees by incentivising resignations and proceed with the next stages.

The announcement was made on Wednesday, and followed a ruling from a judge who said the programme, which offered workers eight months of pay if they resign, could move ahead.

US District Judge George O'Toole in Boston said unions who had sued to stop the programme did not have legal standing.

About 75,000 federal employees opted into the programme before it was closed, according to US media reports.

An announcement on the website of the US Office of Per-

sonnel Management said the program was closed as of 19:20 ET on Wednesday.

The offer is part of an ongoing effort by the Trump administration to slash the size of the federal government, a plan that is being spearheaded by billionaire Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency.

On 28 January, administration officials offered more than two million federal workers the choice to resign and receive eight months of pay.

Administration officials said in an online announcement that employees choosing to leave were "not expected to work", except in rare cases.

The offer was available to full-time federal employees - excluding certain staff such as postal workers, members of

the military, immigration and national security officials.

The offer was announced in an email with the subject line "Fork in the Road" - which resembled one sent to Twitter employees soon after Elon Musk bought the company, which he renamed to X, and began to downsize its workforce.

Employees were given until 6 February to sign up - a deadline that was extended due to the legal challenge.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt has called the offer "generous" for workers and something that will "save the American people tens of millions of dollars".

Democrats, unions and advocacy organisations have said it will lead to a "brain drain" in the federal

government and expressed intense concern over unanswered questions and the legality of the plan.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) and other unions called the offer illegal.

They argued that the offer was a threat pushing employees to resign or risk losing their jobs without any payout. The email noted that those who declined the offer could not be given full assurances that their jobs would not be eliminated.

The unions also said there was no guarantee that those who took the offer would get a full eight months of pay because Congress, which appropriates such funds, had not approved government funding beyond mid-March.

The Nigerian Observer ...That the people may know					ADVERTISEMENT RATES (PRINT)							
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			PUBLIC NOTICE		PRODUCT		COLOUR		BLACK & WHITE			
	RATE	TOTAL (7.5% VAT incl)	RATE	TOTAL (7.5% VAT incl))	RATE	TOTAL (7.5% VAT incl)	RATE	TOTAL (7.5% VAT incl)	RATE	TOTAL (7.5% VAT incl)		
FULL PAGE	517,344	556,145	369,500	397,213	325,150	349,536	665,156	715,043	443,440	476,698		
13 X 4	369,500	397,213	295,600	317,770	206,938	222,458	443,500	476,763	369,550	397,266		
10 X 4	340,000	365,500	273,500	294,013	177,400	190,705	370,000	397,750	295,600	317,770		
HALF PAGE	295,600	317,770	236,500	254,238	147,800	158,885	340,000	365,500	273,450	293,959		
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FP 6X2	89,800	96,535	105,450	113,359	6 X 2	60,640	65,188	49,140	52,826			
FP 5X2	81,100	87,183	97,300	104,598	5 X 2	51,950	55,846	42,120	45,279			
FP 4X2	73,000	78,475	80,700	86,753	4 X 2	45,260	48,655	34,400	36,980			
FP 3X2	64,870	69,735	73,000	78,475	3 X 2	30,900	33,218	26,600	28,595			
FP 2X2	59,000	63,425	64,900	69,768	2 X 2	18,680	20,081	15,600	16,770			
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SPECIAL PAGES					CHANGE OF NAME							
FRONT PAGE	ADD 70% SURCHARGE				Type		Fridays	Other Days				
PAGES 2 & 3	ADD 55% SURCHARGE				Miss to Mrs.		5000	7000				
PAGES 4 & 5	ADD 40% SURCHARGE				Reconciliation/Corrections of name		6000	8000				
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Sports

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Edo FA Cup: Bendel Insurance dispatch Restoration FC, face Feeders in quarterfinals

KEHINDE OSAGIEDÉ

Bendel Insurance Football Club on Thursday began the defense of their Edo FA Cup title beating Restoration FC 2-1 in a second round match played at the Crescent Club mini stadium in Benin.

Second half goals from Osahon Osobo and Chinedu Onyejekwe helped the Benin Arsenal in overpowering the stubborn Benin based amateur side who stunned the NPFL

side in the 14th minute of the game.

Former Sunshine Stars midfielder Osahon cancelled Restoration FC first half goal in the 68th minute time. The Benin Arsenal had to dig deep in the second half of the game against the amateur side before Chinedu Onyejekwe got the winning goal five minutes to the final whistle, with coach Greg Ikhenoba changing his tactical approach when it became difficult for his second

string side to get the desired result. He had rested his first 11 that featured against Enyimba FC less than 12 hours before the Edo FA cup tie.

Meanwhile, it is going to be a family affair on Friday morning as Bendel Insurance will be facing their Feeders team in the first quarter finals game at the same Crescent Club. Kick off time is 9:00 AM.

Insurance Feeders on Monday defeated St. Andrews Foundation FC 2-1 in the sec-

ond round of the 2025 Edo FA Cup tournament and progressed to the Quarters stage of the tournament.

Miracle Oshodin scored twice in the game played at the Crescent club field to give the young Insurers a deserved win.

Bendel Insurance Feeders were unlucky to face their senior brothers who eventually stopped them from progressing to the last four last season and they are meeting again at the same stage this season.



Top Guns to Storm Lagos for 10th Access Bank Lagos City Marathon as World Press Conference holds Friday

As the countdown to the 10th edition of the Access Bank Lagos City Marathon intensifies, Nilayo Sports Management Ltd has announced that a world press conference will be held on Friday at the Headquarters of Access Bank, Oniru, Lagos.

This event is part of a series of activities leading up to race day and is expected to set the tone for what promises to be a landmark edition of the prestigious marathon.

Scheduled for Saturday, February 15, this year's race is set to host approximately 4,000 athletes, including 100 elite international runners, solidifying



Access Bank Marathon

ing its status as one of Africa's premier marathon events.

Among the distinguished personalities expected to be

in attendance are top government officials, sports administrators, and legendary athletes. The roll call includes the

Special Adviser, Media and Public Communication/Spokesperson to the President, Hon. Sunday Dare, Nigeria Olympic Committee (NOC) Vice President, Chief Solomon Ogba, NSC Chairman, Shehu Dikko, NSC Director General, Hon. Bukola Olopade; Athletics Federation of Nigeria (AFN) President, Tonobok Okowa, amongst others.

Adding to the excitement, a host of legendary Nigerian athletes will grace the occasion, including Mary Onyali, Yusuf Alli, and Falilat Ogunkoya, whose contributions to Nigerian athletics remain iconic.

With anticipation building, the 10th edition of the Access Bank Lagos City Marathon is set to be a historic spectacle, bringing together top-tier athletes, dignitaries, and sports enthusiasts from around the world. Stay tuned as the city of Lagos prepares to host yet another thrilling race day!

NFF hunt for Abuja house for Super Eagles coach

The NFF has been shopping for a house in Abuja for Super Eagles coach Eric Chelle.

The coach will make his choice on his return to the country soon, officials said.

"The coach will live and work

in Nigeria and that is why he prefers a house rather than to be putting up in a hotel," an official said.

The country's last two foreign coaches, Gernot Rohr and Jose Peseiro, booked into hotels during their time with the Super Eagles.

18-yr-old former Bayern Munich player suffers 'Brain Death' after collision

Ateenage Chinese player, Guo Jiaxuan, who was previously part of Bayern Munich's World Squad, has reportedly been diagnosed with 'brain death' following a match in Spain.

Guo Jiaxuan, an 18-year-old defender, was reportedly struck in the face by a knee during training camp last Thursday.

He had been playing in a training match against Spanish side RC Alcobendas at a camp organised by the Beijing Football Association.

His brother revealed on so-

cial media that Guo had suffered a subarachnoid haemorrhage – a form of stroke caused by bleeding on the brain – following the accidental collision.

Doctors in Madrid have diagnosed Guo with 'brain death,' according to his brother.



Respite for Bendel Insurance, Nasarawa Utd as NFF restores deducted points

The Nigeria Football Federation (NFF), Disciplinary Committee has restored the points deducted from Bendel Insurance and Nasarawa United.

This was contained in a statement by the NFF following the appeal lodged by Bendel Insurance and Nasarawa United against the NPFL's decision to deduct points accrued to the clubs.

The NFF findings in the game between Bendel Insurance and Kano Pillars in a match day 11 encounter reads, "The Committee affirmed paragraphs a, b, c,

d, and f of the decisions of the NPFL as contained in Form 16, Summary Jurisdiction Notice to Bendel Insurance FC dated 11th November 2024.

"The order in paragraph 'e' deducting 3 points and 3 goals from the accrued points/goals of Bendel Insurance FC by the NPFL is hereby set aside, on the ground that the assault on the match officials was not grievous as provided in Rule C11 of the Frameworks and Rules of the NPFL."

The NFF findings in the game between Nasarawa United and Rivers United played

on 22nd December 2024 read: "The Committee affirmed paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the decisions of the NPFL as contained in Form 16, Summary Jurisdiction Notice to Nasarawa United FC dated 13th January, 2025.

"The order in paragraph '4' deducting 3 points and 3 goals from the accrued points/goals of Nasarawa United FC by the NPFL is hereby set aside, on the ground that the case of assault on the match official was not proven beyond reasonable doubt.

"The Committee recommends that the Match Commissioner, Mr Godfrey Maman JP should be demoted to the Nigeria National League (NNL) category with immediate effect."

Meanwhile, the NFF Committee affirmed the decision of the NPFL following the protest lodged by Plateau United in the game against Rangers International.

"The Committee affirmed paragraphs a – h of the decisions of the NPFL as contained in Form 16, Summary Jurisdiction Notice to Plateau United FC dated 11th November 2024."



Bendel Insurance FC in celebration mood

Cote d'Ivoire 2025: Flying Eagles up against Egypt, South Africa and Morocco

Seven-time champions Nigeria will battle it out with tough customers Egypt, South Africa and Morocco in the group phase of this year's Africa U20 Cup of Nations, scheduled for Cote d'Ivoire 26th April – 18th May.

The Flying Eagles pipped host nation Egypt 1-0 in a group phase match at the last edition

of the competition, and must ensure a great start to their campaign in Cote d'Ivoire in order to build confidence for a gritty tournament. Nigeria finished third in Egypt two years ago.

Former Malian player Adama Coulibaly, who was an assistant at the draw conducted inside the CAF headquarters in Egypt on Thursday, said: "There is no doubt

that the toughest group is the group B that has Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa and Morocco."

Hosts Cote d'Ivoire will have to contend with DR Congo, Ghana, Tanzania and the yet-to-emerge representative team of Central Africa zone, in a five-team group A.

Cup-holders Senegal head group C, which also has Zambia and two debutants Kenya and Sierra Leone.

The two top-placed teams in each group, alongside the best two third-placed finishers in the three groups, will advance to the championship's quarter finals.

GROUP A: Cote d'Ivoire, UNNIFAC, DR Congo, Ghana, Tanzania

GROUP B: Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, Morocco

GROUP C: Senegal, Zambia, Kenya, Sierra Leone.



Flying Eagles celebrating



The Warri prison robbery syndicate: A blot on justice

Nigeria's correctional facilities have once again been thrust into the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. Not too long ago, the Lagos Correctional Centre was enmeshed in controversy over allegations that Idris Okuneye, popularly known as Bobrisky, received VIP treatment while serving a six-month sentence for naira abuse.

The scandal, which sparked public outrage, highlighted the deep-rooted corruption within Nigeria's prison system, where wealth and influence determine the treatment of inmates.

Now, the Okere Prison in Warri South Area of Delta State has become the latest epicentre of controversy, albeit on a far more sinister scale according to *SaharaReporters* (February 4, 2025). While Bobrisky's alleged VIP treatment in Lagos showcased how prisons favour the rich, the Warri scandal reveals how prison officers allegedly collude with criminals to perpetrate crimes outside the prison walls.

Both cases, though different in nature, expose the failure of Nigeria's correctional system to uphold justice and discipline within its facilities.

The recent revelation that inmates of the Okere Prison in Warri allegedly participated in armed robbery disposing a man of a substantial sum of four million naira in Benin City has left many Nigerians in utter disbelief. The very thought that convicted criminals, already confined behind bars, could still orchestrate and execute violent crimes outside the prison walls is a terrifying indictment of the nation's security apparatus.

More distressing, however, is the glaring evidence of collusion between some rogue correctional officers and these hardened criminals, turning what should be a correctional facility into a hub of organised crime.

This incident is not just an isolated case of prison corruption; it is a symptom of the deeper, more systemic failure of Nigeria's correctional system and security institutions. The Warri scandal exposes the terrifying reality that the walls of Nigeria's prisons are not strong enough to confine crime but rather serve as breeding grounds for more sophisticated criminal enterprises.

The fundamental question that has left many dumbfounded is: How could prisoners confined in a supposedly secure facility plan and execute crimes in a city miles away? The answer lies in the complicity of prison officials, the unchecked corruption within the correctional system, and the inefficiency of law enforcement agencies.

Investigations suggest that some correctional officers smuggled mobile phones and other communication devices into the prison, enabling



OLUBUNMI TUNJI-OJO, MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR



SYLVESTER NWAKUCHE, AG CONTROLLER GENERAL OF NCS

The National Assembly, the Ministry of Interior, and other relevant agencies must move beyond mere investigations and enact real, actionable reforms to prevent future occurrences. Justice must be swift, transparent, and uncompromising. The correctional officers who enabled this atrocity must be made an example to deter others

inmates to coordinate their illicit activities with accomplices outside. Furthermore, intelligence reports indicate that these criminals were not merely organising crimes but were also directing the movement of firearms and logistics from inside their cells.

This level of coordination points to an elaborate network that involves corrupt officials, external criminal elements, and possibly even political backers who benefit from the continued chaos.

More worrisome than the acts of the criminals themselves is the involvement of correctional staff —the very people entrusted with rehabilitating and overseeing inmates. When the custodians of law and order become enablers of crime, society descends into anarchy.

It is no longer news that corruption is rife within Nigeria's correctional facilities. From smuggling contraband items to providing undue privileges to influential inmates, some officers have turned their duty posts into thriving

black markets for illicit transactions.

In this case, the correctional staff not only betrayed public trust but actively facilitated heinous crimes, further endangering innocent lives outside the prison walls.

This scenario raises serious questions about the recruitment and oversight of correctional personnel. Are background checks thoroughly conducted before officers are hired? How often are officers scrutinised for corruption and complicity in illegal activities? The absence of strict oversight mechanisms has allowed a culture of impunity to thrive, where some officers see their duty posts as mere profit centres rather than institutions of justice.

The idea of prisons serving as correctional and rehabilitative institutions is fast becoming a mirage in Nigeria. Instead of being places of reform, prisons in the country have morphed into training grounds for hardened criminals. Several reports have highlighted how first-time offenders come out of prison more dangerous than they were before in-

carceration, having been mentored by veteran criminals behind bars.

The Warri case is a chilling testament to this reality. It shows that even death row inmates —those convicted of the most egregious offenses are not deterred by their imprisonment. Instead, they continue to wield influence, directing operations and consolidating their criminal enterprises while awaiting execution. This paints a picture of a nation that is not only failing to punish crime but is inadvertently sustaining it within its own security institutions.

The Warri Correctional Centre scandal is another reminder of the gaping holes in Nigeria's security system. If convicted criminals, even those on death row, can successfully execute robberies from their prison cells, then what hope is left for ordinary citizens who expect protection from the government?

This case further underscores a disturbing trend that law enforcement agencies in Nigeria are often more reactive than proactive. Instead of

preventing crimes, they only respond when the damage has already been done. It is baffling that despite the increasing number of reports about crime syndicates operating from within prisons, authorities have not put robust measures in place to dismantle these networks.

Moreover, the ineffective coordination between different arms of the security sector exacerbates the problem. The Nigerian Correctional Service, the police, and the judiciary operate in silos, with minimal synergy in tackling the root causes of prison-aided crimes. This lack of coordinated intelligence-sharing allows inmates to exploit loopholes in the system, further entrenching criminality.

The gravity of this situation goes beyond the Warri prison scandal. It is a matter of national security. If correctional centres —institutions meant to isolate and reform offenders have become breeding grounds for crime, then the entire country is at risk. It means that any criminal convicted and imprisoned can still operate freely, orchestrating robberies, kidnappings, and even assassinations from behind bars.

This is not just about a few rogue correctional officers; it is about a system that allows such impunity to flourish. The implications are dire. It erodes public trust in the criminal justice system, emboldens criminals, and weakens the rule of law. If unchecked, this trend could lead to a situation where prisons no longer serve as deterrents but as headquarters for organised crime.

The Okere Warri prison scandal demands urgent and thorough investigation by the National Assembly. The legislative body must not only probe the extent of correctional officers' involvement but must also implement sweeping reforms to overhaul the system.

Any correctional staff found guilty of aiding criminals must face the full wrath of the law. Allowing them to go unpunished would only embolden them and cause apprehension among the citizenry.

The use of mobile phones and unauthorised communication gadgets within prisons must be completely eradicated. All correspondence should be monitored to prevent the coordination of external crimes.

Courts must ensure speedy trials and proper sentencing for any prison staff or external collaborators involved in facilitating criminal activities from within correctional centres.

The government must take deliberate steps to transform correctional facilities into true centres of rehabili-

CONTINUES ON PG 5»