

# Senate issues ultimatum to NNPC over ₦210trn audit queries

The Nigerian Senate has issued a firm directive to the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC), mandating its management to appear before the Senate Committee on Public Accounts on April 29, 2026, to account for an alleged ₦210 trillion flagged in audit reports covering the period from 2017 to 2023.

The committee specifically instructed the Group Chief Executive Officer, Mr Bayo

Ojulari, to personally lead the company's management team to the hearing.

Also required to appear are former GCEO, Mr Mele Kyari; former Chief Financial Officer, Umar Ajia; Dr Bala Wunti; as well as the company's external auditors.

The resolution followed a motion moved by Senator Osita Izunaso and seconded by Senator Adams Oshiomhole.

Chairman of the Senate Com-

mittee on Public Accounts, Senator Aliyu Wadada, expressed dissatisfaction with the explanations so far provided by the national oil company, stressing that Nigerians deserve full and transparent disclosure.

Wadada noted that NNPC's responses to 19 audit queries lacked sufficient detail, particularly concerning the breakdown of ₦103 trillion reportedly classified as liabilities.

"Liabilities are in three com-

ponents — retention fees, legal fees, and audit fees. The specific amounts spent on each must be clearly stated and explained," he said.

He further demanded comprehensive clarification on the remaining ₦107 trillion, which the company claimed was expended on Joint Venture Cash Calls and debts allegedly owed by unnamed defunct banks.

"The explanations provided are not acceptable. There must

be transparency and accountability," Wadada added.

The committee warned that NNPC management must appear without fail on the scheduled date, following previous failures to honour invitations by the Senate.

Earlier, Senator Abdul Ningi called for stricter enforcement of legislative authority to compel compliance, cautioning that repeated disregard for National Assembly summons under-

mines democratic institutions.

"We must treat this matter with utmost seriousness. The strength of democracy lies in the authority of the legislature," Ningi said.

The Senate's directive signals intensified scrutiny of the operations and financial records of the state-owned oil company, amid mounting concerns over transparency and accountability in Nigeria's petroleum sector.

# The Nigerian Observer



...that the people may know

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PUBLISHED SINCE MAY 29, 1968

VOL. 47, NO. 1,241

THURSDAY 16TH APRIL, 2026.

**Police warn officers against meddling in land disputes, civil matters**

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# Flood threat: Edo, 32 other states on alert for 2026 —FG

As NCDC alerts 10 states on flood-linked cholera, disease outbreak risks

**BENIN CITY**

Edo State has been placed on high flood alert for 2026 alongside 32 other states of the federation, as the Federal Government warned of widespread flooding risks across thousands of communities nationwide.

The Minister of Water Resources and Sanitation, Joseph

Utsev, disclosed that no fewer than 14,118 communities in 266 Local Government Areas across the country have been classified as high-risk flood zones based on scientific forecasts and hydrological assessments.

Utsev made the disclosure in Abuja during the public presentation of the 2026 Annual Flood Outlook (AFO) by the Nigeria Hydrological

Services Agency, warning that Edo is among states expected to experience significant flooding alongside Abia, Adamawa, Anambra, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Gombe, Imo, Jigawa, Kaduna and Kano.

Others listed in the high-risk category include Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Lagos, Nasarawa, Niger, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo,

Plateau, Rivers, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe and Zamfara, as well as the Federal Capital Territory.

He added that beyond high-risk classification, Edo State also features in the moderate and low flood risk categories, reflecting varying levels of vulnerability across different communities in the state.

According to him, 15,597 communities in 405 LGAs

across 35 states fall within the moderate flood risk category, while 923 communities in 77 LGAs across 24 states are classified as low-risk, with Edo appearing in both categories.

Utsev warned that major ur-

ban centres across the country may experience flash flooding due to intense rainfall, poor drainage systems and rapid urbanisation, while coastal and

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## Lassa fever fatality rate surges in Nigeria —NCDC

**ABUJA**

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC) has said that the fatality rate of Lassa fever has surged in Nigeria, even as the number of confirmed cases continues to decline.

Lassa fever is a viral haemorrhagic illness transmitted mainly through contact with food or household items contaminated by infected rodents.

In its Epidemiological Week 14 report for 2026, the agency said that confirmed infections dropped from 26 in the previous week to 22, but mdeaths among confirmed cases increased significantly.

The report showed that the case fatality rate rose to 24.8 percent, compared to 18.8 percent recorded in the same period in 2025.

According to the NCDC, the cumulative number of deaths from Lassa fever in 2026 has reached 170.

The agency said that cases

have been reported in 22 states and 94 Local Government Areas across the country, with five states accounting for the bulk of infections.

These are Bauchi State, Ondo State, Taraba State, Edo State, and Benue State.

Bauchi State recorded the highest share of confirmed cases at 27 percent, followed by Ondo at 22 percent, Taraba at 18 percent, and Edo at nine percent, while Benue State also reported significant cases.

Other states, including Plateau, Ebonyi, and Kogi, also recorded infections, indicating continued spread across different parts of the country.

The report showed that people aged 21 to 30 years remain the most affected group, with cases recorded among persons aged one to 90 years. The median age is 30 years.

The NCDC also reported a near-equal distribution of cases between males and females, with a slightly higher number

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**PRESS BRIEFING:**

L-R: Senator Abdul Ningi; Senator Osita Izunaso; and Chairman, Senate Committee on Public Accounts, Senator Aliyu Wadada, during a press briefing on the failure of the management of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC) to appear before the committee to account for the alleged ₦210 trillion unremitted funds, at the National Assembly, Abuja, yesterday.

PHOTO: OMOYE AMINU.

**'Miracle Projects': Okpebholo hands over rebuilt shops, pays N8m each to 25 beneficiaries** —Pg 2

**DNA test implicates grandfather in teenager's pregnancy** —Pg 7

**700 killed in Sudan drone strikes as humanitarian crisis deepens —UN** —Pgs 9

**'Let Her Play' produces 30 talents in Lagos community** —Pg 11

# Ordia, Edionwele, Ihenyen lead mass defection to APC in Edo Central

## IRRUA

The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) has suffered a significant political setback as prominent figures in Edo Central, including Senator Clifford Ordia, Hon. Joe Edionwele, and Mrs. Philomena Ihenyen, officially defected to the All Progressives Congress (APC), alongside their supporters.

The defection ceremony, held in Irrua, Esan Central Local Government Area, attracted a large turnout of politicians and supporters, including members of other parties, including the Labour Party.

The defectors were received by APC leaders in the state, led by the State Governor, Senator Monday Okpebholo, as political realignment gathers momentum in the region.

Speaking during the event, Senator Clifford Ordia said that the move was driven by a desire to unite for development in Esan

land and Edo State at large.

"It is time for all Esan sons and daughters to support their own," Ordia said.

"Today, we have come with all sense of humility to join our brother in the struggle to ensure Edo State gets the required development. This is a clear call for all Esan people and all our brothers across the state that the time has come to support what is good."

He added, "Is the government not working? What are we supposed to do? We are going to join him and we have joined him. God will bless all of you."

Also speaking, Hon. Joe Edionwele, a former member of the 8th and 9th National Assembly, representing Esan Central/Esan West/Igubeben Federal Constituency, described APC as the dominant political force in Esan land.

"We are here to celebrate APC as the official party in Esan land," he said.

"The governor has shown

capacity through his performance. Even when you are blind, you should see it."

Edionwele said the decision to join the ruling party was not driven by rivalry, but by support for what he described as visible governance achievements.

"We are not here to compete with anybody, but to complement the performing governor's efforts. Don't be afraid of your seats; we are not here to take over anyone's position," he added.

He further urged local party structures across Edo Central to align with the APC, expressing confidence that the party's presence in the region would continue to grow.

Former Political Adviser and educationist, Mrs. Philomena Ihenyen, also described the event as a historic moment for Esan politics, saying the decision to defect was influenced by support for Governor Okpebholo's administration.

"Today is very historical because we, the Ishan who were in opposition, have realised that if two sons contest and one wins, it is only right to join the winner for the development of the area," she said.

Ihenyen added that continued opposition to the administration would be counterproductive, praising what she described as ongoing development efforts.

"Any Esan man or woman today that does not join Sen-

ator Monday Okpebholo to move Edo forward is not being fair. We are happy with what he is doing," she said.

She also announced the alignment of women's political support groups, noting the emergence of movements such as "Edo Women for Okpebholo" and "Edo Women for Asiwaju," which she said would be formally organised to support development-focused initiatives in the state.

## Flood threat: Edo, 32 other states...

### «CONTINUED FROM PG 1

riverine states such as Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Lagos, Ogun, Rivers and Ondo are expected to face additional risks from rising sea levels and tidal surges.

He attributed the increasing frequency of flooding to climate variability, unregulated urban expansion, inadequate drainage infrastructure and poor land-use practices, urging state governments to strengthen preparedness and enforcement of planning regulations.

"The Annual Flood Outlook is not just a scientific document; it is a call to action. Early warning saves lives and reduces economic losses," he said.

Utsev added that the Federal Government is strengthening hydrological monitoring through improved data systems, automated river gauges and advanced modelling techniques, while enhancing collaboration with the Nigerian Meteorological Agency and the National Emergency Management Agency to improve early warning dissemination.

President Bola Tinubu, represented by the Minister of Environment, Balarabe Lawal, described flooding as a persistent national challenge, noting that recurring disasters since 2012 have underscored the need for stronger preventive measures.

He said the Federal Government had introduced flood control projects and the Anticipatory Action initiative coordinated by the Office of the Vice-President to improve preparedness, coordination and emergency response.

The president urged states, including Edo, to utilise the 2026 flood outlook in planning mitigation strategies aimed at protecting lives, livelihoods and critical infrastructure.

Also speaking, the Director-General of NIHSA, Umar Mohammed, said the forecast was based on comprehensive data-driven analysis and enhanced with a hybrid artificial intelligence model to improve accuracy and lead time.

He added that the agency's Flood Dashboard now provides real-time monitoring and dissemination of alerts,



### CONDOLENCE VISIT:

Edo State Deputy Governor, Hon. Dennis Idahosa, receiving the Coordinator, Office of the First Lady of Edo State, Edesili Okpebholo Anani, at his Benin City residence during a condolence visit over the passing of his mother, Madam Esther Imaguomwanruo Idahosa. PHOTO: MOSES OBOH.

## Arms control centre deepens regional efforts with new armoury, training support

### ABUJA

The National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) has stepped up efforts to strengthen regional arms control and reduce armed violence with the deployment of new secure storage infrastructure and expanded training programmes.

The Director-General of the centre, retired DIG Johnson Kokumo, said this at the handover of a containerised armoury donated by the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) with support from the United States Government in Abuja.

Kokumo said the initia-

tive formed part of a broader regional intervention across West Africa and the Sahel aimed at curbing the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons.

He noted that beyond infrastructure, the programme had significantly boosted human capacity, with specialised training for armoury personnel and weapons management experts.

According to him, more than 1,300 risk education sessions have been conducted, reaching over 22,000 people in high-risk communities, while dozens of personnel have been trained in armoury management, storekeeping and weap-

ons marking.

"These are not just figures; they represent strengthened national and regional capacity to manage weapons responsibly and prevent them from falling into the wrong hands," he said.

Kokumo stressed that effective arms control requires a combination of secure infrastructure, trained personnel and sustained international collaboration.

He described the new armoury as a critical component in improving accountability and ensuring that weapons under government custody are properly managed.

"This intervention aligns

with broader regional efforts to implement arms control frameworks and reduce the flow of illicit weapons across borders," he added.

The DG emphasised that the fight against arms proliferation was not limited to Nigeria, but required coordinated action across the ECOWAS region.

He commended the support of MAG and the United States Government, noting that such partnerships were vital in strengthening institutional capacity and promoting best practices in weapons management.

Kokumo also reaffirmed the centre's commitment to upholding strict standards in armoury management and supporting regional stability through effective arms control measures.

## Lassa fever fatality rate surges in...

### «CONTINUED FROM PG 1

among males.

Infections among healthcare workers were also confirmed during the reporting period.

The agency said that although suspected cases have declined, confirmed infections remain higher than levels recorded in the same period in 2025.

It added that it is working with partners, including the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC), to strengthen

response efforts.

Interventions include infection prevention and control training for health workers, distribution of protective equipment, active case search, contact tracing, and community sensitisation in affected areas.

Rapid response teams have also been deployed to seven high-burden states, while treatment centres continue to receive essential supplies, including Ribavirin.

The NCDC listed late presentation of cases, treatment costs, poor sanitation, and low awareness as ongoing challenges affecting response efforts.

## Police warn officers against meddling in land disputes, civil matters

### ABAKALIKI

The Ebonyi State Police Command has cautioned its officers and men against undue interference in civil matters, particularly land disputes.

The directive was issued by the Commissioner of Police, Hope Okafor, during a strategic briefing with Area Commanders, Divisional Police Officers, Heads of Departments and other senior officers, according to a statement by the

Command's Public Relations Officer, SP Joshua Ukandu, on Wednesday.

Okafor also warned officers against detaining suspects beyond the legally stipulated period, stressing the need to uphold the dignity and fundamental rights of persons in custody.

"There is urgent need for officers to adopt professional conduct that will inspire public trust and confidence. Profiling of citizens based on appearance is not acceptable.

"I kick against the indiscriminate stopping and searching of personal devices such as mobile phones and other gadgets," she said.

The commissioner further urged officers to align with the vision of the Inspector-General of Police aimed at repositioning the Nigeria Police Force and improving its public image.

"We must comply with the directive of the IGP. Do not solicit or collect money from members of the public on the

roads. Stop operating illegal checkpoints.

"Avoid deliberate luring of citizens into traffic violations to extort them, arresting innocent citizens and coercing them to withdraw money from Automated Teller Machines (ATMs).

"We must avoid engaging in unauthorised VIP escort duties in violation of existing presidential directives. Exhibiting indiscipline in appearance, including improper dressing and poor personal grooming, will not be tolerated," Okafor added.

# 'Miracle Projects': Okpebholo hands over rebuilt shops, pays N8m each to 25 beneficiaries

EKPOMA (EDO)

**BENIN CITY**

The Secretary to Edo State Government (SSG), Umar Musa Ikhilor, has described ongoing developments under Governor Monday Okpebholo as "a miracle," as the administration handed over rebuilt shops destroyed by fire to families of police officers in Ekpoma.

Speaking at the event in Esan West Local Government Area, Ikhilor said Edo people were witnessing a historic transformation marked by un-

precedented speed and scale of project delivery.

"What we are witnessing in Edo State today is something history is made of. Many years from now, people will look back at this era and testify that a man was raised to rescue Edo people," he said, referring to the governor, popularly known as Akpakomiza.

He highlighted the reconstruction of the burnt shops belonging to police officers' wives, noting that the project was completed in less than 80 days.

"These blocks of shops

were delivered in under three months. That has never happened before. What we are seeing is beyond ordinary; it is something close to a miracle," he added.

Ikhilor also recounted how popular musician Eedris Abdulkareem, who had previously criticised President Bola Tinubu, changed his stance after touring projects in Edo Central with the governor.

"By the time he saw the projects himself, he became a convert and is now speaking positively about the administration. That shows that what

is happening here is real and visible," he said.

He further noted that economic revival along the Auchi-Ekpoma-Benin Expressway corridor was already evident, with previously dormant business areas coming back to life.

"It is not just about infrastructure. Economic activities that were once dead along this road are returning. Shops that were deserted are now active again, and the impact is spreading across Esan West, Esan Central, and Esan North East," he said.

Also speaking, the Edo State

Commissioner of Police, Monday Agbonika, thanked the governor for rebuilding the shops destroyed in the January 11 inferno, describing the intervention as timely and impactful.

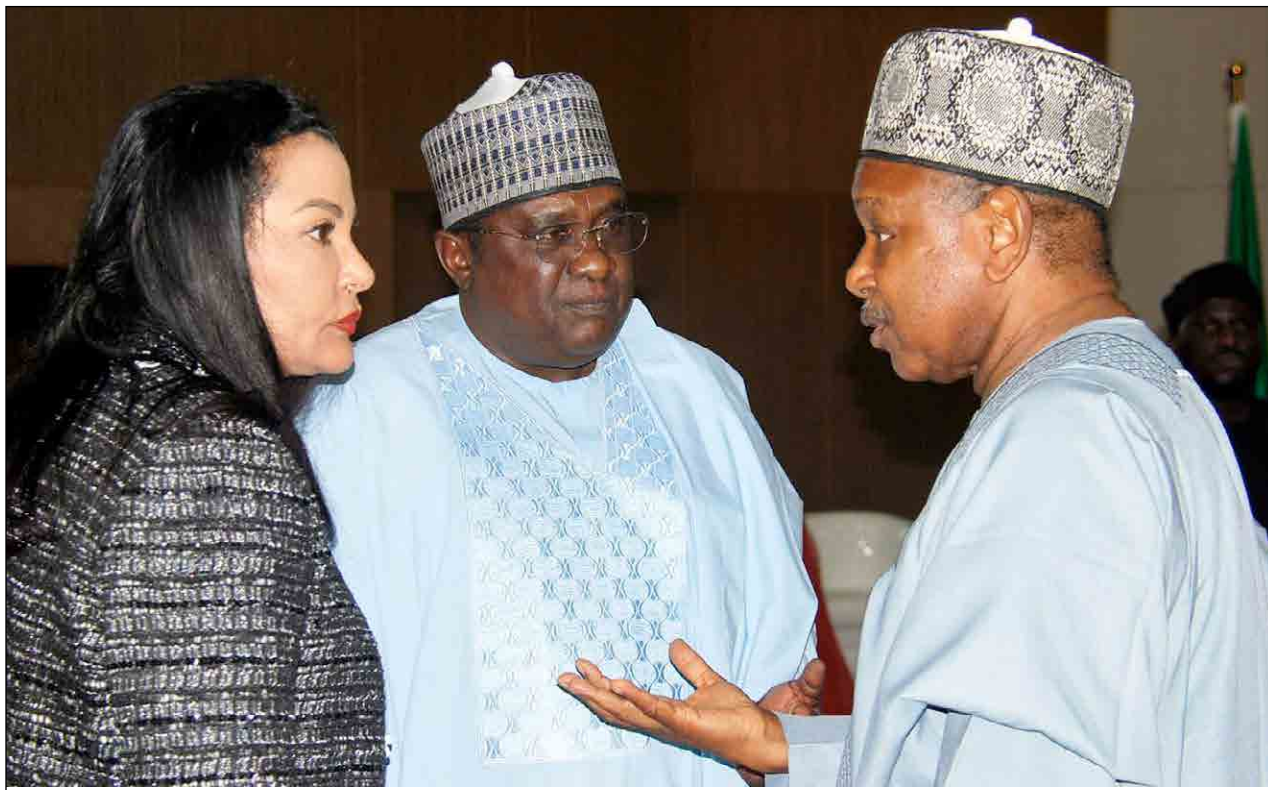
"Our job is very risky, and when we go out to protect lives, we want to be assured that our families are safe. When these shops were burnt, it affected many homes. Today, we are grateful because what has been rebuilt is even stronger and more secure," he said.

Agbonika added that the gesture would boost morale among officers and enhance their commitment to protect-

ing lives and property, noting that the government had also supported the police with operational vehicles, motorcycles, allowances and infrastructure upgrades.

Dignitaries at the event included the Speaker of the Edo State House of Assembly, Blessing Agbebaku, APC Deputy State Chairman, Sylvester Aigboboh, commissioners and party leaders.

The event also featured the presentation of cheques of N8 million each to 25 beneficiaries, marking a significant step in the area's recovery and economic revitalisation.

**NATIONAL POLICY DIALOGUE:**

L-R: Minister of State for Budget and Economic Planning, Dr Doris Uzoka-Anite; Chairman, House of Representatives Committee on National Planning and Economic Development, Adegboyega Isiaka and Minister, Budget and Economic Planning, Sen. Abubakar Baguda, during the National Policy Dialogue on Imperatives of National Development Plan and Effective Budgeting System for Sustainable Growth of the Nigerian Economy, held in Abuja.

## Ugonoba community to hold land verification exercise

MONDAY OISE

**BENIN CITY**

Elders and residents of Ugonoba Community, Ward 10, along Agbor Road in Uhumwonde Local Government Area of Edo State, have announced plans to com-

mence a comprehensive verification exercise aimed at orderly development.

The decision was contained in a statement signed by the Ohen, Pa Otabor Airhavbere; Secretary, Dickson Emokpae; and the Okaighele, Eliot Ikponwonsa, on behalf of the Ugonoba Com-

munity Land Allocation and Allotment Committee.

The statement said the exercise would involve identification, verification, enumeration, partition and demarcation of communal land for building, development and other purposes.

According to the committee,

the exercise will run from April to June 30, 2026, at the Ugonoba Community Town Hall.

The elders appealed to residents, including indigenes and non-indigenes, as well as intending developers, to cooperate fully and participate in the exercise to ensure a smooth and peaceful process.

## Edo community alleges Odionwere hijack plot

MONDAY OISE

**BENIN CITY**

Tension is brewing in Iguevbiobo Village, Uhumwonde Local Government Area of Edo State, as residents raised alarm over an alleged plot to hijack the traditional office of the Odionwere.

The Odionwere, by Benin tradition, is the oldest surviving man in the community and serves as the administrative

head, leading the Council of Elders and performing key cultural and spiritual roles.

Speaking on behalf of the community, the Okaighele (Youth leader), Austin Evbuomwan, said that the Palace of Benin Monarch, HRM, Oba Ewuare II, had directed that the rightful person be installed in accordance with tradition.

He explained that although the mandatory three-year period following the demise of the last Odionwere ends in April

2026, the monarch approved a six-month extension to allow the community to reach a consensus.

Evbuomwan disclosed that the Oba had warned against any breach of the directive, stressing the need to avoid crisis among subjects.

However, he alleged that some indigenes in the diaspora were plotting to impose a candidate who is not the oldest man in the community.

According to him, the rightful

candidate, Pa Daniel Okungbowa, is alive, mentally sound and ready to assume the position.

He warned that any attempt to impose another candidate could trigger avoidable conflict.

"Iguevbiobo has been peaceful, and we want to avoid anything that could lead to crisis," he said.

He appealed to the Oba Palace and relevant authorities to intervene swiftly to prevent actions that could destabilise the community.

## Utorogu gas plant project raises hope for jobs, devt in Delta

BETTY IDIALU

**WARRI (DELTA)**

Residents and stakeholders in Utorogu and neighbouring communities have expressed optimism over the groundbreaking of a 200 million standard cubic feet per day (MMSCFD) gas processing plant by Southfield Petroleum Limited.

The project is being hailed as a potential catalyst for job creation, infrastructure development and economic growth in the area.

Community leaders at the ceremony emphasised the need for sustained peace and cooperation to ensure successful execution, noting that the benefits would largely impact grassroots communities.

President-General of Iwrekan Community, Ufuoma Omoberayen, said that the people's peaceful disposition had encouraged investors to undertake large-scale projects in the area.

He expressed confidence that the plant would generate employment for youths, stim-

ulate small businesses and attract further investments.

Similarly, the Okobaro of Ughievwen Kingdom, HRM Dr Matthew Ediri Egbi Owahwa II, described the project as a landmark development, expressing optimism about its long-term socio-economic benefits.

Stakeholders noted that the plant would also have a ripple effect across Delta State by boosting commercial activities, logistics demand and service-based opportunities.

Officials of the Nigerian Content Development and Monitoring Board (NCDMB), a key investor, said that the project would create both direct and indirect employment, while enhancing indigenous participation in the oil and gas sector.

They added that opportunities would span fabrication, operations, maintenance and logistics, strengthening local capacity and enterprise development.

Chairman of Southfield Petroleum Limited, Patrick Ndiomu, assured host communities of the company's commitment to partnership, trust and shared prosperity.

## Edoba drives UNIBEN transformation with innovation, infrastructure —Don

MONDAY OISE

**BENIN CITY**

A senior lecturer at the University of Benin, Dr Osasere Greg Igbinomwanhia, has commended the Vice-Chancellor, Prof Edoba Bright Omoregie, for what he described as visionary and pragmatic leadership that is reshaping the institution.

Speaking in an interview, Dr Igbinomwanhia, an Associate Professor and member of the university's Senate, said that the Vice-Chancellor has introduced rare ideas, programmes and far-reaching reforms since assuming office, positioning the university on the path of sustained growth and global relevance.

He noted that beyond driving an ongoing infrastructural rev-

olution across the campus, Prof Omoregie has implemented innovative academic programmes that have elevated standards to align with international best practices.

"As a member of the Senate of the University, I can attest to the consistent efforts and sacrifices the Vice-Chancellor makes to reposition the institution for greater heights," he said.

Dr Igbinomwanhia added that the administration's reforms have significantly boosted student enrolment at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with a notable surge recorded in the current academic session.

He further disclosed that the Vice-Chancellor has fully digitalised and centralised results processing and release, leading to improved efficiency and faster service delivery.

## NEWS

# Tinubu arrived at critical moment, deserves second term —Fasoranti

## AKURE

Former Secretary to Ondo State Government (SSG), Dr Taiwo Fasoranti, has said that President Bola Tinubu assumed office at a critical moment in Nigeria's history, stressing that his administration has begun addressing key national challenges.

Fasoranti stated this in an interview with newsmen on Wednesday in Akure.

He said the dividends of democracy were already becoming evident, noting that although the country had not yet reached its destination, the reforms introduced so far were yielding results.

"The dividends of democracy are visible for all to see. We are not there yet, but with the reforms introduced so far, I believe we will get there.

"Look at the dollar-to-naira

exchange rate; it has started declining, which reflects a stabilising economy.

"Insecurity is also being addressed with deliberate attention. Security challenges are a global issue," he said.

Fasoranti added that the president's Renewed Hope Agenda had continued to deliver positive outcomes.

"All we can do is support him to ensure that the initiatives aimed at strengthening our democracy are sustained by encouraging and backing these laudable projects. Clearly, no one has been left behind.

"I believe Tinubu has performed well. Another four-year term will further secure his legacy in the annals of history.

"In 2027, I am 110 percent confident of his victory. I have no doubt in my mind," he said.

## ADC convention ratifies David Mark-led NWC

## ABUJA

The African Democratic Congress (ADC) has ratified a new National Working Committee (NWC) led by Sen. David Mark to steer the affairs of the party for the next four years.

The decision was taken at the party's 8th national convention held in Abuja, where delegates from all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory voted overwhelmingly in support of the leadership.

The convention also approved key amendments to the party's constitution through a voting process.

In his remarks, Mark commended the planning committee chairman and described the convention as well organised and superior to previous ones he had attended.

He said the convention marked the beginning of the party's march towards national leadership and urged members to remain committed to its growth and development.

## Abia JUSUN strike over judiciary autonomy, not allowances —Union

## UMUAHIA

The Abia State chapter of the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN) has said its ongoing strike is driven by the government's failure to implement financial autonomy for the judiciary, rather than issues of unpaid allowances.

Chairman of the union, Mr Chinedu Ezeh, made this known while briefing newsmen in Umuahia.

Ezeh explained that unpaid leave allowance was only a minor component of the union's demands.

"The unpaid leave allowance is not the main reason for this strike; it is a small component of our demands," he said.

He stressed that the core issue was the enforcement of financial independence for the judiciary as agreed in the June 2023 Memorandum of Understanding.

The state government had earlier attributed the strike,

which began on March 13, to disputes over outstanding leave allowances.

The Attorney-General and Commissioner for Justice, Ikechukwu Uwanna, had called on the union to suspend the strike to enable pension verification and payment for retired judiciary staff.

However, Ezeh insisted that the union's demands centred on judicial autonomy.

He clarified that leave allowance and leave bonus are distinct, with the former being statutory at 10 percent of gross earnings, while the latter is a discretionary five per cent paid monthly.

Ezeh also rejected the government's call for pension verification, arguing that the exercise falls under the responsibility of the Judicial Service Commission.

He added that workers had not received March salaries due to the strike, which would continue until the union's demands are met.

Speaking on his ambition to represent Ondo Central Senatorial District, Fasoranti said his decision to contest was driven by a desire to offer quality representation and committed service.

"I believe our people deserve quality representation, purposeful leadership, and committed service. I also believe we can do better than what we currently have.

"My goal is to serve my community and ensure they

benefit from the dividends of democracy under the present administration, where I served as SSG," he said.

He noted that the state was on a steady path under Governor Lucky Aiyedatiwa and emphasised the need to attract more federal presence to sustain ongoing programmes and introduce new initiatives.

"This will help stabilise ongoing programmes and sustain them while introducing fresh ideas from the federal level,"

he said.

Fasoranti said his grounding in Afenifere's Omoluabi ethos would guide his accountability to the people.

He added that he had consulted widely and was fully prepared for the senatorial race, expressing confidence of victory.

The former SSG also cited his experience as a physician who worked at the Presidential Villa for 15 years, as well as his network of allies, as advantag-

es.

"I am not a stranger to Abuja, and I believe returning there as a senator will greatly benefit Ondo Central.

"We are not novices when it comes to delivering development. Our track record speaks for itself," he said.

Fasoranti, appointed SSG by Governor Aiyedatiwa in 2024, resigned on April 3 to contest the Ondo Central Senatorial seat in the 2027 general elections.



### CONDOLENCE VISIT:

Edo State Deputy Governor, Hon. Dennis Idahosa (left) receiving His Royal Highness, Oluawere of Usen, Oba Wilson Oluogbe II at his (Idahosa) Benin City residence during a condolence visit over the death of his mother, Madam Esther Imaguomwanruo Idahosa. With them is one of the Palace Chiefs.

PHOTO: MOSES OBOH.

## Troops recover IED, ransom cash in Enugu operations

## ABUJA

Troops of the 82 Division, Nigerian Army, under Operation UDO KA, have uncovered an improvised explosive device (IED) and recovered ransom cash during operations in Enugu State.

This was disclosed in an operational report released to reporters in Abuja.

According to the report, troops of 82 Division Garrison, in collaboration with 103

Battalion and the Air Component, carried out clearance operations in Ajali Forest, Ezeagu Local Government Area.

The operation targeted enclaves of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN).

During the exercise, troops discovered an anti-tank improvised explosive device along the axis.

"The IED was recovered to a safe area by an Explosive

Ordnance Disposal team after three failed detonation attempts," the report stated.

Troops also continued forest clearance using bulldozers and chainsaws to deny criminal elements freedom of action.

In a related operation at Adani in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area, troops acted on actionable intelligence indicating that ransom paid for a kidnapped victim had been electronically traced to a location near their deployment.

"Troops swiftly mobilised and apprehended a suspect's brother at the scene," the report said.

Further exploitation led to the recovery of a pump-action rifle and N2 million from the suspect's residence.

The suspect and recovered items have been handed over to relevant authorities for further investigation.

"All operations were conducted successfully without incident," the report added.

## Enugu rolls out free malaria testing, treatment in 527 health facilities

## ENUGU

The Enugu State Government has commenced free malaria testing and treatment in no fewer than 527 health facilities across the 17 local government areas of the state.

The Commissioner for Health, Prof. George Ugwu, disclosed this to reporters on Wednesday in Enugu.

He said the initiative covers

both public and private health facilities, including Primary Healthcare Centres, General and Cottage hospitals, as well as selected tertiary institutions.

According to him, the programme is aimed at drastically reducing malaria prevalence among residents.

"The ongoing statewide Enugu State Ministry of Health Malaria Elimination Project, envisioned and driven by Governor Peter Mbah, is designed

to improve the health and well-being of residents.

"The government, with support from health partners, has made available free malaria test consumables and drugs in many facilities," he said.

Ugwu urged residents to take advantage of the initiative by visiting nearby health centres, noting that eliminating malaria would reduce both health and financial burdens.

He also advised medical practitioners to confirm malaria through testing before treatment, stressing that not all fever cases are malaria-related.

The commissioner revealed that the project, which has been running for over a year, is now being scaled up.

He added that recent four-year gap survey data showed that malaria prevalence in the state had dropped to 9.9 percent.

# Troops storm Bauchi forest, crush bandit camps, capture families, destroy logistics

ABUJA

Troops of the Nigerian Army have intensified offensive operations against bandits in Bauchi State, overrunning camps, capturing family members and destroy-

ing logistics in Dajin Madam forest.

This was contained in an operational report made available to newsmen on Wednesday in Abuja.

According to the report, troops of the 33 Artillery Bri-

gade, in conjunction with a team from the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), carried out the clearance operation.

The troops successfully cleared several bandits' camps, including the notorious Azuge

and Hari camps, disrupting criminal activities within the forest.

Several bandits were neutralised during the operation, while others fled under sustained military pressure.

The report further disclosed

that troops took into custody 19 family members of the bandits, comprising six women and 13 children.

Items recovered include an AK-47 magazine, tramadol drugs, materials linked to impersonation, a pair of police uniform, several military uniforms, and two horses.

Several motorcycles used by the criminals were destroyed, significantly limiting their mobility and operational capability.

Troops have since established a firm hold within the forest to consolidate gains and prevent re-infiltration by fleeing bandits.

In a related development,

troops conducted a follow-up clearance operation at Mainamaji after recent air strikes on bandits' hideouts. No contact was made, indicating that sustained military pressure has degraded the bandits' presence in the area.

The report noted that ongoing operations continue to disrupt bandits' networks and restrict their movement, reaffirming the Nigerian Army's commitment to sustaining pressure until lasting peace and security are restored.

Members of the public were urged to support security agencies with timely and credible information.



## A CLOSED DOOR MEETING:

Olubadan of Ibadanland, Oba Rashidi Ladoja (L) and former Governor of Ekiti State, Mr Ayodele Fayose, during a closed door meeting in Ibadan on Wednesday.

# Police nab suspected cult kingpins, recover firearms in Ondo

AKURE

The Ondo State Police Command has arrested two suspected cultists, uncovered hideouts and recovered firearms in Ondo Town, Ondo East Local Government Area.

The command's spokesperson, DSP Abayomi Jimoh, disclosed this in a statement on Wednesday in Akure, noting that the suspects were arrested on April 11.

Jimoh said the arrest formed part of ongoing efforts to

curb cultism and other violent crimes through intelligence-led policing and strategic community collaboration.

Operatives of the Special Anti-Cultism Squad (SACS), Akure, carried out the operation based on credible intelligence provided by the Ondo End Mischreant Group.

Preliminary investigations revealed that the suspects are affiliated with the notorious Eiye and Aiye confraternities, both linked to recurring violent clashes in parts of the state. "The suspects were identi-

fied as participants in a cult-related clash that occurred on April 9 within the premises of Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo.

"They are members of rival groups engaged in a confrontation that threatened public peace and safety," Jimoh said.

The suspects, identified as Nnamdi Sunday and Adegbuyi Seyi, reportedly cooperated with investigators and led operatives to a suspected Aiye cult hideout at Oka Garage Area of Ondo Town.

A search of the location led to the recovery of one locally made English pistol believed to have been used in criminal activities.

The suspects are currently in custody, while investigations continue to apprehend other fleeing members and recover additional arms and ammunition.

The Commissioner of Police in the state, Adebawale Lawal, reiterated the command's resolve to rid Ondo State of cultism and criminality.

He assured that perpetrators of violence would be identified, arrested and prosecuted, while commending the Ondo End Mischreant Group for providing timely intelligence.

Residents were urged to remain vigilant and support security agencies with credible information.

# Defectors won't hijack APC structures —Nat'l Chairman

ABUJA

National Chairman of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Prof. Nantewe Yilwatda, has assured legacy members that political defectors will not be allowed to take over the party's leadership structures.

Yilwatda gave the assurance after a closed-door meeting with Federal Capital Territory (FCT) stakeholders on Tuesday in Abuja.

He drew a distinction between founding members and new entrants, stressing that while both interests would be protected, no group would

dominate the other.

"It is a home that we built. If the house was not built, nobody will come, so nobody should come as a warrior and take over," he said.

He, however, emphasised the need for a deliberate power-sharing formula to ensure inclusiveness across both blocs.

"We must have everybody included. There will be a sharing formula that ensures both legacy members and defectors are properly carried along," he added.

On the FCT party structure, Yilwatda outlined a five-dimensional sharing formula, including gender inclusion with

women occupying substantive executive positions, geo-political representation across the six zones, inclusion of indigenous FCT groups, and youth engagement.

He confirmed the existence of a committee chaired by the Minister of Special Duties and Inter-Governmental Affairs, Zephaniah Jisalo, noting that it had conducted zoning in line with party guidelines.

According to him, no party member has complained of marginalisation, adding that the APC constitution would be strictly enforced during forthcoming congresses.

He also stated that defectors

seeking executive positions must present resignation letters duly accepted by their former party chairmen.

"If you are in opposition, you must show evidence of resignation accepted by your former party chairman," he said.

Yilwatda reiterated that any member who had spent eight consecutive years in one office must step down or change position.

He stressed that inclusion remains central to his leadership philosophy, noting that women should not only be mobilisers during elections but active participants in governance.

# Bird strike grounds United Nigeria aircraft, disrupts flights

LAGOS

United Nigeria Airlines (UNA) has confirmed a bird strike involving one of its CRJ-900 aircraft, forcing its withdrawal from operations and causing flight disruptions.

The airline's Public Relations Officer, Mr Chibuikwe Uloka, disclosed this in a statement on Wednesday in Lagos.

Uloka said the incident occurred during the landing of Flight UN0579 from Mallam Aminu Kano International Airport, Kano, to Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, on Tuesday evening.

He explained that the aircraft has been withdrawn for comprehensive technical inspection and necessary main-

tenance in line with strict safety standards.

"Consequently, some flights across our network may not operate as scheduled; however, safety remains our highest priority."

"We sincerely apologise for any inconvenience this unforeseen development may cause to our passengers," he said.

Uloka revealed that this marks the fifth bird strike involving the airline's aircraft since January, noting that all incidents had been handled in full compliance with aviation safety regulations.

He reaffirmed the airline's commitment to safety and operational reliability, assuring passengers that measures are being taken to optimise operations and meet expectations.

# PDP still formidable force ahead of 2027 —Kaduna stakeholders

KAFANCHAN (KADUNA)

Stakeholders of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Southern Kaduna have declared the party a formidable platform ahead of the 2027 general elections.

The position was made known during the Kaduna South Senatorial District PDP expanded caucus meeting held in Kafanchan.

Zonal Chairman of the party, Mr Akusor Danjuma, assured members, supporters and aspirants that the PDP remains intact and ready to participate in the 2027 polls.

"We came to assure our stakeholders and those contesting on the PDP platform that we will be on the ballot in 2027," he said.

Danjuma urged aspirants to remain resolute, assuring that the party would provide a level playing field.

He noted that while direct primaries may be adopted, consultations were ongoing among aspirants to reach consensus across positions.

"There is no cause for concern regarding internal processes. Aspirants should intensify consultations to arrive at consensus," he added.

Former state chairman, Felix Hyet, described the PDP as the foundation of Nigeria's democratic development, noting that many members of other parties originated from the PDP.

A former deputy governor, Mr Nuhu Bajoga, said the party continues to enjoy strong grassroots support in Southern Kaduna, describing the region as a PDP stronghold.

"Southern Kaduna is the home of the PDP. We cannot let it go to any other party," he said.

A House of Assembly aspirant, Danjuma Sarki, dismissed concerns over defections and alleged intimidation, insisting that such developments would not weaken the party.

Other stakeholders criticised the ruling APC, blaming current economic hardship on poor governance and expressing confidence that the PDP would regain power in 2027.

## NEWS

# IMF backs Nigeria bank recapitalization, seeks stronger fiscal buffers

## WASHINGTON

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has endorsed Nigeria's ongoing bank recapitalization drive, noting that stronger capital buffers are helping to cushion the financial system against external shocks and enhance resilience amid rising global uncertainties.

Tobias Adrian, Financial Counsellor and Director of the IMF's Monetary and Capital Markets Department, stated this during the presentation of the Global Financial Stability Report at the IMF/World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington D.C.

Adrian emphasised that robust fiscal positions remain critical for emerging markets to withstand volatile global capital flows, reduce exposure to sudden market reversals and maintain macroeconomic stability under uncertain financial conditions.

He highlighted the growing importance of bank recapitalisation during periods of heightened global financial stress, stressing that a well-capitalised

banking sector is essential for sustaining financial stability.

According to him, the benefits of recapitalisation are most evident during stress periods, as stronger capital positions enable financial institutions to absorb shocks, sustain lending activities and support broader economic stability.

Adrian also noted that tightening financial conditions and evolving risks across international capital markets require sustained policy attention to ensure economic resilience.

He added that ensuring debt sustainability and maintaining strong fiscal positions remain central to IMF engagement with countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where tailored programmes address diverse vulnerabilities.

On capital flows to the region, Adrian observed that ongoing Middle East conflicts have triggered outsized reactions, with movements roughly twice those recorded during the early stages of the Ukraine crisis.

Despite the shifts, he said

price reactions have remained relatively contained, reflecting a broadly healthy global

risk appetite, while calling for sustained investor confidence amid geopolitical tensions.

Also speaking, Jason Wu, Assistant Director in the IMF's Monetary and Capital Markets

Department, said capital flows to emerging markets are increasingly driven by debt rather than foreign direct investment and equity.

He warned that this trend raises concerns about long-

term global financial stability, noting that countries with stronger fiscal positions typically enjoy better access to international markets and lower borrowing costs.



## VISIT OF MEMBERS OF CITY BOYS MOVEMENT:

Governor Douye Diri of Bayelsa State (L), receiving a plaque from the President of City Boys Movement, Mr Oluwatsin Shoga, during the visit of members of City Boys Movement to the Governor in Government House, Yenagoa.

## Edun hails reform gains, leads global call for fairer finance

## WASHINGTON

Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economy, Wale Edun, has reaffirmed the gains of the Federal Government's economic reforms while leading a global call for a fairer international financial system.

Edun made the call at the Intergovernmental Group of Twenty-Four (G24) news conference during the IMF/World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington D.C., where he also serves as Chairman of the G24.

He outlined key priorities for developing economies grappling with geopolitical tensions, energy disruptions, tightening financial conditions and rising inflation.

The minister called for global support commensurate with current challenges, including expanded access to affordable financing, improved liquidity

and reforms to international financial systems.

He said Nigeria's ongoing reforms are strengthening economic fundamentals, improving policy credibility and enhancing resilience against external shocks despite global uncertainties.

Edun stressed that macroeconomic stability remains essential for attracting investment, adding that coordinated fiscal, monetary and trade policies are yielding stronger outcomes.

He noted that the country is shifting focus towards job-rich, inclusive growth driven by private sector participation, infrastructure development, energy investment, financial inclusion and human capital development.

According to him, Nigeria is leveraging its leadership of the G24 to influence global economic discourse, advocate fairer outcomes and reinforce domestic reforms through strategic engagement.

## Drug traffickers: Marwa opposes fines, seeks tougher jail terms

## ABUJA

The Chairman of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), retired Brig.-Gen. Buba Marwa, has called for stricter jail terms without the option of fines for drug traffickers, saying tougher penalties are needed to deter illicit drug activities.

Marwa made the call in Abuja at the unveiling of the

National Minimum Standards on the Implementation of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 and related laws.

He said experience has shown that the option of fines in place of imprisonment has failed to deter traffickers, contributing to the rise in illicit drug abuse.

He urged the Chief Judge and judges of the Federal High Court to impose strict custodi-

al sentences on offenders who do not deserve leniency.

According to him, Nigeria currently has over 10 million cannabis users, a situation he described as deeply worrying.

"In the last five years, the agency seized about 15 million kilograms of assorted illicit substances, out of which between 70 and 75 per cent is cannabis," he said.

Marwa disclosed that the NDLEA had engaged cannabis

growers, particularly in Ondo State, to encourage a shift to legitimate food and cash crop farming.

He noted that the initiative is yielding positive results, with many farmers embracing alternative livelihoods.

He added that hundreds of farmers opting out of cannabis cultivation would not only secure sustainable livelihoods but also avoid the risk of arrest and prosecution.

## NSCDC arrests 2 over alleged rape of minors in Ondo

## AKURE

The Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Ondo State Command, has arrested two suspects for allegedly raping two minors, aged 13 and 15, in Akure.

The command's Head of Media and Public Relations, SC Daniel Aidamenbor, disclosed

this in a statement on Wednesday.

He said the suspects, aged 22 and 38, committed the offences on March 13 and April 13 and were arrested at different locations in the state.

"In two separate cases, one Emeka Chidi Innocent, a 22-year-old farmer, raped a 13-year-old girl on March 3.

"He had been on the run un-

til he was tracked and arrested at Idanre in Idanre Local Government Area.

"Also, Ayodele John, a 38-year-old tiler, defiled a 15-year-old minor in her parents' house in Akure on April 13 and was arrested the following day," he said.

Aidamenbor stated that both suspects have made confessional statements and would

be charged to court.

He urged parents to carry out proper profiling and background checks on artisans, warning against neglecting parental responsibilities.

"Parental duties should not be outsourced. In these cases, both suspects were known to the victims and their parents," he added.

## Benue reviews action plan to boost women's security, inclusion

## MAKURDI

The Benue State Multi-Stakeholders Implementation and Monitoring Committee (SMIMC) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), in collaboration with partners, has commenced a review of the State Action Plan to strengthen women's security and inclusion.

Chairman of the committee, Mr Joseph Gbagyo, disclosed this at a review and revalidation

meeting in Makurdi, noting that the existing plan had expired.

Gbagyo said the review aims to reactivate and improve the framework to enhance women's participation in peacebuilding, security, politics and governance.

He explained that the structure was established by the CLEEN Foundation to drive implementation of WPS in line with UN Resolution 1325.

"The Benue Action Plan was launched in 2021 with sup-

port from International Alert and the Norwegian Embassy to provide a roadmap for addressing women, peace and security issues.

"Unfortunately, the document was not well implemented and has since expired, leaving a gap," he said.

He noted that emerging issues such as digital violence, conflicts arising from mining activities and protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs) had not been adequate-

ly addressed.

According to him, the exercise is aimed at updating the existing document rather than drafting a new one.

Gbagyo said commitments had been secured from key partners, including the Benue Budget and Planning Commission, Benue Peace and Reconciliation Committee, Ministry of Women Affairs and other stakeholders.

He commended the CLEEN Foundation and the Direc-

tor-General of the Budget and Planning Commission for their support and active participation.

"We are adopting a multi-sectoral approach involving tertiary institutions to enhance research and curriculum development," he added.

Also speaking, Mrs Magdalene Igbazua, CLEEN Foundation Benue Coordinator, said the review seeks to identify gaps and reflect changing realities since 2025.

She noted that the original plan was largely unknown to stakeholders and never fully

implemented.

"If we have an active action plan, it will enhance women's involvement in peace and security and guide decision-making processes," she said.

The Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development, Mrs Theresa Ik-wue, represented by Mr Austin Ugbir, assured the committee of the ministry's support and readiness to collaborate.

Other participants included security agencies, civil society organisations and relevant government ministries.

## JUDICIARY

## NEWS

## DNA test implicates grandfather in teenager's pregnancy

## MINNA

A DNA test has confirmed that a 65-year-old man, Musa Gado, allegedly impregnated his 16-year-old granddaughter in Niger State, the state Child Rights Agency has disclosed.

The Director-General of the agency, Hajiya Kaltume Mohammed, told journalists on Wednesday that the suspect is currently in police custody and would be charged to court after investigations are concluded.

Mohammed said the Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) test established that Gado, the maternal grandfather of the victim from Mashegu Local Government Area, is the biological father of the baby boy delivered by the teenager in December 2025.

She revealed that the victim's father, Lawal Nababa, had in October 2025 reported repeated sexual assaults on his daughter by her grandfather.

According to her, the vic-

tim was already six months pregnant when the case was reported and was thereafter taken into the agency's custody, where she remained until she gave birth.

The DG added that the suspect initially denied responsibility, prompting the agency to order a DNA test conducted in a laboratory outside Nigeria at a cost of N500,000.

"When the girl was brought to the agency, she was already six months pregnant. We carried out medical checks and

kept her in our custody until she delivered.

"After delivery, we waited for her to regain strength before conducting the paternity test. Within five weeks, the result came out, confirming with 99.9999 per cent certainty that the grandfather is the father of the baby," she said.

Mohammed further disclosed that the suspect allegedly made several unsuccessful attempts to terminate the pregnancy.

She noted that the victim,

though her parents are alive, had been living with her maternal grandmother since childhood.

The agency boss expressed concern over the rising cases of child abuse in the state, revealing that it is currently handling six similar cases, including that of a father accused of sexually

abusing his biological daughter.

"Child molestation and rape are alarming in the state. Since I assumed office in November 2025, we have recorded numerous cases involving abuse by parents, neighbours and other members of the community," she said.

## Man arraigned for defrauding brother of N4.8m

## KADUNA

A 38-year-old man, Aaron James, was on Wednesday arraigned before a Kaduna Magistrates' Court for allegedly defrauding his brother of N4.8 million.

James, a resident of Barnawa, is facing charges of fraud and stealing but pleaded not guilty. Prosecutor Insp. Chidi Leo told

the court that the defendant obtained the money under the pretence of selling three plots of land, but failed to deliver and converted the funds to personal use.

The offences contravene sections of the Kaduna State Penal Code, 2017.

Magistrate Ibrahim Emmanuel granted bail in the sum of N500,000 with two sureties and adjourned the case to May 12.

## Tenant docked for allegedly assaulting landlady

## BADAGRY

A 47-year-old tenant, Temitope Elegbede, was on Wednesday arraigned before a Badagry Chief Magistrates' Court in Lagos for allegedly assaulting his landlady.

The defendant pleaded not

guilty to charges of assault and breach of peace.

Prosecutor ASP Edet Ekpo alleged that Elegbede grabbed the neck of the landlady, Oluwabunmi Otokiti, during an incident on April 7 at Ilogbo, Badagry.

The court granted him bail of N500,000 with sureties and adjourned the case to May 14.

## Business partner sued over N150,000 debt

## KADUNA

A businessman, Adamu Isah, has dragged his business partner, Bala Kurmin Mashi, before a Shari'a Court in Kaduna over an alleged N150,000 debt.

The complainant told the court that the defendant paid

only N50,000 out of a N200,000 agreement.

Defence counsel said the defendant was ill and efforts at settlement had failed.

The judge, Yakubu Abdullahi, declined to give judgment in the absence of the defendant and adjourned the case to April 29.

## Security guard docked for alleged intimidation, threat to life

## KANO

A 35-year-old security guard, Aliyu Umar, was on Wednesday arraigned before a Shari'a Court in Kano on charges of causing hurt and intimidation.

He pleaded not guilty.

Prosecutor Aisha Digol told the court that the defendant allegedly slapped and threatened to kill the complainant during a dispute.

The court ordered his remand and adjourned the case to May 20.



## CONFERMENT OF FELLOWSHIP AWARD:

L-R: Vice Chairman, Nigeria Institute of Journalism (NIJ), Governing Council, Ray Ekpu; Chairman, NIJ Governing Council, Olusegun Osoba, awardee and Comptroller-General of Nigeria Customs Service, Adewale Adeniyi and Provost of NIJ, Gbenga Adefaye, during the conferment of fellowship award on the Comptroller-General by NIJ in Lagos on Wednesday.

## Court fixes May 26 for DSS to open terrorism case against Malami, son

## ABUJA

The Federal High Court in Abuja has fixed May 26 for the Department of State Services (DSS) to open its case against former Attorney-General of the Federation, Abubakar Malami (SAN), and his son, Abdulaziz, over alleged terrorism-related offences.

The DSS is prosecuting the

duo before Justice Joyce Abdulmalik on a five-count amended charge bordering on terrorism.

At the resumed hearing, prosecution counsel, Akinlolu Kehinde (SAN), informed the court that an amended charge had been filed, replacing the earlier one on which the defendants were arraigned. He applied to withdraw the earlier charge and requested that the

fresh charge be read.

Defence counsel, Shaibu Aruwa (SAN), confirmed receipt of the amended charge and raised no objection.

After the charge was read, both defendants pleaded not guilty.

The prosecution alleged that the defendants, in December 2025, conspired to commit acts of terrorism and were found in

possession of a Sturm Magnum 17-0101 firearm, 16 live cartridges and 27 expended shells without licence.

The alleged offences are said to contravene provisions of the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022, and the Firearms Act.

Following the plea, the court fixed May 26 and June 15 for trial and ordered that the defendants continue on the bail earlier granted on February 27, having met the conditions.

## 2 admit to 12kg cannabis trafficking in Ibadan

## IBADAN

Two suspected drug traffickers, Lekan Raji and Iyabo Mutiu, on Wednesday pleaded guilty before a Federal High Court in

Ibadan to charges of conspiracy, possession and trafficking in 12 kilogrammes of Cannabis Sativa.

The duo were arraigned by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA).

Justice Uche Agomoh ordered that the defendants be remanded in Agodi Correctional Facility and adjourned the case to April 28 for review of facts.

Prosecutor D.O. Otunla told the court that the defendants

were arrested on February 14 at Oriyangi-Idiosan, Ibadan, following intelligence reports.

He said Raji was found with 2.10kg of the substance, Mutiu with 4kg, while both conspired to traffic 6.107kg.

## High salt intake may accelerate memory decline in men — Study

## SYDNEY

A new study has found that a diet high in salt may accelerate memory decline in men, highlighting the role of nutrition in maintaining brain health.

The research, conducted by Edith Cowan University and published in Neurobiology of

Aging on Wednesday, revealed that higher sodium intake is associated with faster deterioration of episodic memory.

Episodic memory enables individuals to recall personal experiences and past events.

Researchers tracked 1,208 participants over 72 months, analysing their sodium consumption alongside changes in

cognitive performance.

The findings showed that men with higher sodium intake experienced more rapid memory decline, while no significant link was observed among women.

Lead researcher Samantha Gardener said although the exact biological mechanisms remain unclear, excessive sodium may contribute to brain in-

flammation, damage to blood vessels and reduced blood flow to the brain.

Sodium is essential for bodily functions, but excessive intake has long been linked to high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

The study adds to growing evidence that dietary habits may significantly affect cognitive health.

## Man, 24, arraigned for allegedly stealing umbrella

## ADO-EKITI

A 24-year-old man, Biremoni Adeniyi, was on Wednesday arraigned before an Ado-Ekiti Chief Magistrates' Court for allegedly stealing an umbrella valued at N10,000.

The defendant pleaded not guilty.

The prosecutor said the offence occurred on April 9.

The court granted bail of N10,000 with one surety and adjourned the case to May 12 for hearing.

## NEWS

## Foreign

# Trump's rift with Pope is playing out in public - it's costing him valuable support

It is not unusual for President Trump to face criticism from Catholic leaders.

His hardline immigration policies, promised in his campaign and cheered on by supporters, have prompted condemnation from church leaders. For months it has put the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in the US at odds with more right-leaning rank-and-file Catholics.

But the broad backlash in the last 48 hours, over Trump's attack on Pope Leo and his sharing of an AI image of himself as a Christ-like figure, is very different.

What is striking is where some of this criticism is coming from - loyal, conservative Catholic allies.

They are unhappy, not just because of Trump's public friction with Pope Leo, but at a much deeper level over the Iran war.

The uproar over Trump's lengthy social media attack on the first American pope, as too liberal and too "weak on crime", together with the AI image, have crystallised a shift in opinion among many Catholic conservatives since the war began six weeks ago.

"I pray that all of this will clarify for people that we don't look to a national leader, we don't look to those who have the most money or the most weapons. We look to Christ," says Bishop Joseph Strickland.

These words come from a man who, only last year, participated in a prayer event to "consecrate" the president's Mar-a-Lago home.

In 2024, Strickland delivered the keynote speech at CPAC where Donald Trump was the guest of honor. In 2020, he ad-

ressed a march of Trump supporters calling to overturn the election results.

He has been a staunch supporter of Donald Trump through thick and thin.

Indeed, his overt political alignment, and open confrontation with the late Pope Francis, even played a part in his removal from office as Bishop of Tyler, Texas.

Yet, in the face of starkly competing White House and Vatican narratives regarding the war in Iran and the wider Middle East, Bishop Strickland has made a rare break from the administration.

"I do not believe this conflict meets the criteria of a just war. I stand with the Holy Father and his call for peace. This is not about politics. It's about moral truth," he told the BBC, saying the scale of death and suffering faced by innocent civilians

meant the war could never be viewed as "just".

More than that, he has challenged the White House on its handling of the war and encouraged other Catholics to do the same.

"It becomes very dark when religion is used to justify immoral behaviour... using religion to justify especially dropping bombs is contradicting what the faith is about," says Bishop Strickland.

When asked about Trump's attack on Pope Leo and the image some have referred to as "AI Jesus", which Trump said he thought was a doctor not Jesus, Bishop Strickland said he felt it was his "duty" to remind the US president of the Gospel of Matthew. He pointed to a passage that teaches that supreme power resides with Christ and not with any man.

## ...Italian PM condemns ally Trump over 'unacceptable' Pope criticism

Pope prioritises world's fastest-growing Catholic region in major Africa tour

"The Pope is the Pope, we owe him a certain amount of deference, but I don't think that Catholicism wants the obedience of cadavers. We are living, thinking persons," he says.

Wolfgang has transitioned from a cautious Trump pragmatist, keen that abortion laws be overturned, to a more enthusiastic supporter. He is a strong defender of mass deportation policies and the brand of Catholic nationalism represented by JD Vance. But he is now highly critical of the US president's behaviour towards Pope Leo.

"President Trump does not understand how Catholicism works. The Pope is not merely a head of state, he is the Vicar of Christ. Attacks on him are received as attacks on the Church itself. The more he attacks the Pope the more his support will drop among his Catholic voters," Wolfgang told the BBC.

Peter Wolfgang says his faith led him to challenge US Catholic bishops when they criticised President Trump's immigration policies, but the same faith makes him opposed to this war.

"When President Trump is out there talking about ending Iranian civilisation, or Secretary Hegseth is out there making some bloodthirsty prayer that is unrecognisable to Catholics, then it's completely natural for conservative

Catholics to line up behind Pope Leo," he says.

Soon after the first US and Israeli attacks on Iran, US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth recited a highly controversial prayer at a Pentagon worship service that talked of "overwhelming violence" and "justice executed swiftly and without remorse".

In his writings, Peter Wolfgang often reserves his fiercest criticism for the Catholic "left" but he thinks the Iran issue has to some extent unified factions, partly because of the clarity of the Pope's anti-war messaging.

Unusually no senior US Catholic member of clergy publicly has supported the war in Iran. Even Robert Barron, Bishop of Winona-Rochester, a key Trump ally, demanded that the US president apologise to the pope for his angry tirade, a demand that was rebuffed.

Positioned on the liberal wing of the Catholic church, Steven Greydanus, a deacon and prominent commentator, also sees this unusual convergence of opinion.

He feels that a contributory factor has been the White House's "subversion" of the principles of "Just War Theory" - theology that determines when it is right to go to war and how to conduct that war.

But he says it is also partly down to the contrast between President Trump and the "healing presence" of Pope Leo.



**TRUMP AND POPE:**

US President, Donald Trump's and Pope Leo.

## Israel and Hezbollah continue attacks after Israel-Lebanon talks in US

Fighting between Israeli forces and the Iran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah has continued after Israel and Lebanon held direct talks in Washington aimed at easing the conflict.

On Wednesday, Israeli strikes hit two vehicles on the coastal highway south of Beirut, near the towns of Saadiyat and Jiyeh and outside Hezbollah's traditional strongholds.

Videos from one scene showed a burned-out van, with first responders working to extinguish the flames and recover human remains. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military.

In northern Israel, a man was wounded in the town of Tamra after Hezbollah launched about 30 rockets across the border, according to

medics and the military.

Hezbollah said it had launched rockets at 10 locations in northern Israel.

The Israeli military also said Israeli troops were continuing ground operations in southern Lebanon and that more than 200 Hezbollah infrastructure sites there, including rocket launchers, had been struck over the past 24 hours.

And it renewed calls for residents across a large part of southern Lebanon to evacuate amid the ongoing air and artillery bombardment.

Although Israel has avoided striking Beirut itself since its wave of attacks across the country a week ago, which Lebanese authorities say killed more than 350 people in only 10 minutes, it has continued to strike southern and eastern areas.

Israel has announced that it plans to create what it has described as a security buffer zone extending eight to 10km (five to six miles) inside Lebanese territory, saying the move is necessary to protect Israeli communities from Hezbollah attacks.

In the early hours of Wednesday, clashes were reported in several Lebanese border towns and villages, including Khiam and Bint Jbeil, with heavy gunfire and explosions heard throughout the night.

Israeli troops continue operations in southern Lebanon to create what Israel describes as a "buffer zone"

The fighting has continued despite a ceasefire between the US and Iran, which Israel has said does not apply to its campaign in Lebanon.

On Tuesday, a meeting in Washington brought Lebanese and Israeli representatives together for the first direct, high-level contact in three decades between the two countries, which remain formally at war.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who mediated the discussions between Israeli ambassador Yechiel Leiter and Lebanese ambassador Nada Moawad, framed them as a pivotal moment.

"This is a historic opportunity," he said, flanked by US, Israeli and Lebanese flags, acknowledging the "decades of history" behind the conflict.

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun voiced cautious optimism, saying he hoped the negotiations would "mark the beginning of the end of the suffering of the Lebanese people."

## Sri Lanka repatriates 238 Iranian sailors stranded after US torpedo attack

More than 200 Iranian sailors left stranded in Sri Lanka after a US torpedo attack are returning home after being stuck in the country for more than a month.

On Wednesday, Sri Lanka's Deputy Defence Minister, Aruna Jayasekara, confirmed 32 sailors rescued from the Iris Dena and 206 from Irins Bushehr, had left the country.

The Iranian warship, Iris Dena, sank on 4 March about 40km (25 miles) from Sri Lanka's southern coastline after it was hit by a torpedo from a US submarine, killing 104 sailors.

On March 5, Sri Lanka took control of the Iranian naval vessel, Irins Bushehr, after it had requested to dock at one of country's ports after one of its engines malfunctioned.

Speaking to Reuters, Jayasekara confirmed the crew of both ships were flown out on Tuesday night.

The stranded sailors were granted 30-day entry visas by the Sri Lankan government and were housed in navy and air force camps.

The Iris Dena had been returning from a military exercise hosted by India when it

was attacked.

Video released by the US Department of Defense after the incident showed a ship being struck, causing the stern to rise up before exploding.

The bodies of 84 Iranian sailors killed in the attack were recovered and later repatriated in a chartered plane arranged by Iran.

Its sinking in international waters came just a few days into the current US-Israeli war with Iran and marked a dramatic widening of the conflict.

Iran has since launched retaliatory strikes across the Middle East - targeting Gulf countries allied with the US.

About 15 Iranian sailors will remain in Sri Lanka to operate the Irins Bushehr, which is anchored off Trincomalee in the northeast of the island.

Sri Lanka had allowed the Iranian vessel to dock at a north-eastern port on 5 March after hours of discussion, with its president saying they would "never hesitate to protect humanity".

"Our position has been to safeguard our neutrality while demonstrating our humanitarian values," President Anura Kumara Dissanayake said in a statement at the time.

## Foreign

## NEWS

## Nine killed in second Turkish school shooting in two days

Ambulances and police vans were seen outside the school, as well as tearful parents rushing towards the school.

At least eight students and one teacher have been killed and several others injured following a shooting at a school in southern Turkey, Interior Minister Mustafa Cifci has said.

The incident happened at Ayser Calik Secondary School in the Kahramanmaraş area.

The attacker was also killed during the incident, local governor Mukerren Unluer said.

It comes a day after 16 people were injured after an ex-student opened fire at another high school, also in the south of the country, before killing himself.

People were seen escaping

through the school's windows. Cifci said 13 people were wounded, with six in critical condition.

The motive of Wednesday's attack is not yet known and an investigation has been launched.

Turkish media reported that the attacker, believed to be a teenager, entered two classrooms and had five guns and seven magazines with him, which Unluer alleged belonged to his ex-police officer father.

"The sound of gunfire was very intense," a reporter for Turkish broadcaster NTV said, adding that there was "panic in front of the school".

Footage from the scene showed crowds of people, some filming on their mobile phones, and ambulances driving away.

## 250 missing after migrant boat sinks in Indian Ocean

About 250 Rohingya and Bangladeshi, including children, are missing after their boat capsized last week in the Andaman Sea, according to the United Nations' refugee and migration agencies.

The trawler, which had departed from Bangladesh and was bound for Malaysia, "reportedly sank due to heavy winds, rough seas and overcrowding", the agencies said.

It is unclear when the boat capsized, but on 9 April, a Bangladesh-flagged vessel rescued nine people who were "clinging to drums and wooden debris" to stay afloat, the coast guard said.

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, one of Myanmar's many ethnic minorities, have been fleeing across the border into Bangladesh since a deadly crackdown in 2017.

The Rohingya, who are primarily Muslim, are denied citizenship by the government of Myanmar, a Buddhist-majority country.

Poor living conditions in Bangladesh however have also prompted some Rohingya to make precarious journeys on overcrowded vessels to Malaysia, a Muslim country which some envision to be a safe haven in the region.

Quoting those rescued after last week's incident, a Coast Guard member, who asked not to be named, told the BBC that they had left Bangladesh for Malaysia on April 4 "in the hope of a better life."

He said that on April 7 or 8, their boat was caught in a storm.

"They were left floating at sea for nearly two days, holding onto drums and pieces of wood," he added.

As the Bangladesh-flagged Motor Tanker Meghna Pride was sailing from Bangladesh to Indonesia, its crew found the survivors around 2 AM on April 11 and brought them on

board. Later, it was learned that they were from both Bangladeshi and Rohingya communities in Cox's Bazar.

The ship later entered Bangladesh waters and handed them over to the Coast Guard vessel, the Mansoor Ali.

The survivors said they had seen nearly 100 people.

"But the exact number is still unknown," the officer added, "and there is no trace of the others or of the boat".

Rafiqul Islam, one of the survivors, told AFP he floated for nearly 36 hours before being rescued, adding that he was burned by oil that spilled from the vessel.

The 40-year-old said the promise of a job in Malaysia was what persuaded him to get on the boat.

"This tragic incident reflects the dire consequences of protracted displacement and the absence of durable solutions for the Rohingya," the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in its statement jointly issued with the International Organization for Migration.

Ongoing violence in Rakhine, their home state in Myanmar, has "faded hopes of safe return in the near future", the agencies said, noting that shrinking humanitarian assistance and challenging living conditions in refugee camps have pushed them to "take such dangerous sea journeys in search of safety and opportunity".

These boats are often small and cramped, lacking in basic facilities like fresh water and sanitation. They do not always make it to their destinations. Some die at sea, while others are sometimes detained or deported.

Some have also been turned away upon nearing Malaysia and Indonesia, either by authorities or local coastal communities. In January 2025, Malaysia turned away two boats carrying around 300 refugees after giving the passengers food and water.



### RECEIVING FOOD AID:

Women displaced from El-Fasher stand in line to receive food aid at the newly established El-Afadh camp in Al Dabbah, in Sudan's Northern State, in November 2025.

## 700 killed in Sudan drone strikes as humanitarian crisis deepens —UN

Nearly 700 civilians have been killed in drone strikes in Sudan since January, the United Nations said, underscoring the escalating toll of a civil war now entering its fourth year.

According to UN humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher, most of the deaths occurred in the first three months of 2026, with near-daily drone attacks reported across conflict zones.

The strikes have particularly affected regions such as Kordofan and Darfur, where fighting remains intense.

The UN children's agency has warned that drones account for a large share of child casualties, with attacks hitting homes, markets and schools.

Mass displacement and hunger

The war between Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces has killed tens of thousands and displaced more than 11 million people.

Entire communities have been uprooted, while famine conditions spread across parts of the country.

More than 19 million people are now facing acute hunger, according to UN agencies, as food, fuel and basic supplies become increasingly scarce.

Thousands missing

The International Committee of the Red Cross says over 11,000 people have been reported missing since the conflict began, a figure that has risen sharply in the past year.

Destroyed communication networks have left families without news of loved ones, adding to the psychological toll of the war.

Worsening humanitarian outlook

The UN describes Sudan as the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with nearly two-thirds of the population in need of aid.

Despite reaching millions, relief efforts remain severely underfunded.

Officials warn that continued fighting, combined with rising costs linked to global instability, could push even more people into hunger and deepen an already catastrophic situation.

## South Africa names apartheid-era politician as new ambassador to the US

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa has appointed Roelf Meyer, who served in the last government of the apartheid era, as his new ambassador to the US, his office has said.

The country has not had a top envoy in the US since Ebrahim Rasool was expelled last year after he accused President Donald Trump of trying to "project white victimhood as a dog whistle".

This worsened already strained relations between the nations, which took a downward spiral after Trump's return to office last year.

Ramaphosa's spokesperson Vincent Magwenya confirmed Meyer's nomination, telling the BBC it would be "immediate".

"I can confirm that President Cyril Ramaphosa has appointed Meyer as South Africa's ambassador to the US," he said.

Meyer, 78, played a key role as one of the chief mediators, alongside Ramaphosa, during the talks to end the racist system of white-minority rule known as apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s.

He was the chief representative of the National Party, which introduced apartheid,

while Ramaphosa represented the African National Congress (ANC) led by Nelson Mandela.

During that period, the two enjoyed a fishing trip together and went on to form a lifelong friendship.

Meyer was part of a group of 32 prominent South Africans the president chose last year to guide the national dialogue, a process aimed at addressing the country's various challenges.

He was constitutional affairs minister in the last apartheid government and later joined the government of national unity formed in 1994 when Mandela became president.

He left just two years later and went on to co-found the United Democratic Movement. He later became a member of the ANC.

Meyer, a white Afrikaner, was considered a reformist within the NP and was later considered a traitor by some right-wing Afrikaners for his role in the peace talks.

Afrikaners are mostly white descendants of early European settlers and President Trump has said they are currently facing a genocide and persecution in South Africa - a claim that is widely discredited.

This was part of the reason he announced a pause in aid to the country early last year and introduced a policy welcoming Afrikaners as refugees.

Ramaphosa has said it was "completely false" to claim that "people of a certain race or culture are being targeted for persecution".

The news of Meyer's appointment has received a mixed reaction in South Africa, with some calling it a politically savvy appointment and others raising his age as a concern.

While the ANC's Fikile Mbalula welcomed it, Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters party said it was "politically tone deaf" and a "deliberate insult to our democratic struggle".

The most stinging criticism came from right-wing Afrikaner groups, AfriForum and Solidarity Movement.

AfriForum leader Kallie Kriel, in a post on X, called Meyer an "ANC cadre" whose "history shows that he is someone who is willing to dramatically reposition himself to suit his own personal interests".

Solidarity, which the South African government has ac-

cused of peddling misinformation in the US, said Meyer's appointment was disappointing, especially given his age.

"Far from instilling confidence among Afrikaners, this choice risks deepening existing concerns within our community," the group's spokesperson Jaco Kleynhans said on X.


Meyer had previously addressed the issue of his age when he was questioned about whether he would consider taking up the ambassadorial post if Ramaphosa asked him.

"I don't think somebody of my age should take on that responsibility at this stage quite frankly. [This role] is something that demands everyday, hard work in [Washington] DC... [and] youthful energy," he said.

Ramaphosa however, defended the appointment, saying Meyer would "represent South Africa very well".

"Meyer is well attuned with the policies of this country," the president told reporters on Wednesday.

Analysts in South Africa have broadly welcomed Meyer's appointment, hailing it as a positive and "clever, tactical decision" by the president.

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**EFFECTIVE FROM FEBRUARY 1, 2023**

# Feature

## GENDER EQUALITY AND EQUITY

# Hope for women on the ballot in 2027 elections

GRACE IJEOMA UMEH

The Table Is Still Incomplete.

Democracy without women is a table with one leg. It may stand for a while, but it cannot carry weight. As Nigeria looks toward the 2027 elections, the question of gender equality and equity in politics is no longer a slogan for Women's Day. It is a survival question for the nation. We cannot build a 21st-century country with 19th-century rules about who is allowed to lead. Yet the evidence is stark. Women make up nearly 50 percent of Nigeria's population, but less than 5 percent of elected officials at the National Assembly level after the 2023 elections. In many State Houses of Assembly, not one woman sits. That is not representation. That is exclusion.

The 2027 elections offer a chance to reset. But hope is not strategy. To get more women into office, we must name the real barriers. We must count the cost. We must also show where equity, not just equality, changes the game. Equality gives every woman the right to contest. Equity removes the stones placed on her path before the race starts.

### 1. UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE: EQUALITY VS. EQUITY

Equality says women can run. The Constitution allows it. The Electoral Act allows it. Party constitutions allow it. On paper, the door is open. Equity asks a harder question: can she actually enter? Can she pay the nomination fee? Can she survive the midnight meetings? Can she campaign without being called names? Can she lose and still live safely?

Equality puts women on the ballot. Equity makes the ballot reachable. In 2027, we need both. We need laws that guarantee inclusion, and we need systems that fund, protect, and promote women who step forward. Without equity, equality is decoration. Without equality, equity has no door to open.

### 2. THE FINANCIAL WALL: POLITICS IS PRICED TOO HIGH

Let us start with money, because money stops most women before they start. The cost of involvement in politics in Nigeria is brutal. Nomination forms for major parties run into tens of millions of naira. Campaign logistics cost more. Posters, radio, television, billboards, and transport across wards drain pockets. Then there is "stomach infrastructure" and delegate management during primaries. Many women are qualified, experienced, and popular. They are not liquid.

Most women do not control family assets. Land is in the husband's name. Loans require collateral they do not have. When they seek support, they are told to bring a godfather. That godfather often comes with strings. He wants loyalty, not leadership. He wants a proxy, not a partner. So women step back, not from fear of service, but from the math of survival.

Equity means we confront this directly. Parties must slash nomination fees for women. The 50 percent rebate some parties offer is good. Zero fee is better. The Electoral Act should cap campaign spending and enforce it. INEC and

civil society should create a Women's Campaign Fund. Private sector donors should fund women candidates the way they fund startups. Politics is the biggest business in Nigeria. We must invest in women like we invest in oil blocks.

### 3. SOCIETAL DEMANDS: THE DOUBLE SHIFT, THE DOUBLE STANDARD

A woman who runs for office is asked questions a man never hears. Who will cook for your husband? Who will care for the children? Why are you outside at night? If she is single, they say she is irresponsible. If she is married, they say she is neglecting her home. If she is divorced, they say she cannot keep a house, so how can she keep a constituency. If she is beautiful, they say she slept her way up. If she is plain, they say she is bitter. There is no winning look, only a losing standard.

This double standard is enforced by culture, religion, and media. Town halls start at 9 p.m. because that is when men are free. Campaign tours run through nights and forests. Security is thin. Rumors are thick. A woman who attends is called loose. A woman who avoids it is called unserious. The same act is judged two ways.

Then there is the double shift. Most women candidates still run homes. They still pay school fees. They still care for aged parents. They run for office after running the family. Men run for office as the main job. Women run for office as the second job. That is why many burn out before the primaries.

Equity here means changing the rules of engagement. Meetings can hold at 4 p.m. Campaigns can use technology. Debates can be virtual. Security must be guaranteed for female aspirants. Parties must sanction members who use sexual slurs or threats. Media must stop asking women about their husbands and start asking about their manifestos. Churches and mosques must preach participation, not just prayer. Culture is not law. Culture can change.

### 4. VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION: THE HIDDEN TAX

Violence is the hidden tax women pay in politics. It is physical, verbal, and digital. Thugs tear their posters. Rivals sponsor smear campaigns. Online mobs call them prostitutes. At rallies, they are groped. At collation centers, they are threatened. After elections, winners are harassed with petitions designed to exhaust them.

The 2023 elections showed this clearly. Female candidates reported intimidation at primaries. Some were told to step down for male aspirants "in the interest of the party." Others were substituted after winning. Security agencies were slow to act. The cost of violence is not just bruises. It is silence. For every woman who runs, ten others watch and decide never to try.

For 2027, equity means protection. INEC must create a Violence Against Women in Elections, VAWE, tracker and publish it weekly. Police must assign contact officers for all female candidates. Courts must fast-track cases of substitution and threats. Parties must lose slots if they substitute a woman illegally. Digital platforms



Nnenna Elendu-Ukeje

must take down coordinated gendered abuse within 24 hours. Safety is not a favor. It is a condition for democracy.

### 5. GATEKEEPING IN PARTIES: THE PRIMARIES ARE THE PROBLEM

Most women do not lose elections. They lose primaries. The party gate is where the knives are sharpest. Delegate systems are captured. Lists are manipulated. Venues are changed at midnight. Consensus is announced in the absence of aspirants. Women, who often join parties late because of family and financial reasons, have fewer delegates. They have fewer godfathers. They have less time for the endless night meetings where deals are cut.

If we want more women on the ballot in 2027, we must reform primaries. Direct primaries give women a fighting chance because they can appeal to the base, not just to delegates. Independent candidacy, if passed into law, would free women from party capture. Zoning should include gender. If a seat is zoned to a senatorial district, parties can zone it to women within that district. The 35 percent affirmative action policy must move from paper to practice. NAWOJ, FIDA, and women's wings in parties should run primaries monitoring rooms and call out fraud in real time.

### 6. THE COST TO FAMILY AND MENTAL HEALTH\*

We must be honest about the personal cost. Politics takes time. It takes money. It takes skin. Women in politics report anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Marriages strain under rumors. Children face bullying in school. Friendships break on party lines. The public sees the campaign photo. It does not see the night the aspirant cried because a sponsor withdrew after asking for sex. It does not see the day her mother called her a disgrace.

Empowerment must include support. Women need legal clinics before they buy forms. They need media training to control their narrative. They need

security training to move safely. They need mental health support to survive loss. NGOs and development partners should fund "Campaign Survival Kits" for women. These kits should include a lawyer, a media aide, a security contact, and a counselor. Hope is not enough. Help is required.

### 7. WHY IT MATTERS: THE DATA IS CLEAR

This is not charity. It is strategy. Data from states with more women in leadership show higher spending on health, education, water, and child nutrition. Women legislators sponsor more bills on sexual violence, maternity care, and school enrollment. Women executives complete community projects at higher rates. When women are in power, politics becomes less about sharing and more about serving.

Nigeria cannot meet its development goals with half the team on the bench. We need women in councils to fix primary health care. We need women in assemblies to pass child rights laws. We need women as governors to prioritize education budgets. We need women in the Senate to reform security votes. Inclusion is not a gift to women. It is a gift to the country.

### 8. WHAT WOMEN MUST DO DIFFERENTLY FOR 2027

Hope for 2027 also depends on women. First, start early. Do not wait for 2026 to join a party. Join now. Build delegates now. Map your ward now. Second, run together. The era of one brave woman per state is over. Slates win. If five women run for five seats in one LGA, they protect each other. Third, own your money. Start a cooperative now. Raise your own campaign base through small donations. Ten thousand women giving 1,000 naira is 10 million naira. Fourth, control your story. Get on radio monthly. Use Facebook and TikTok daily. If you do not tell your story, your opponent will tell it for you. Fifth, pick your battles. Not every insult needs a reply. Not every

district is ready. Start where you are loved. Expand from there.

### 9. WHAT MEN MUST DO: FROM GATEKEEPERS TO PARTNERS

Men are not the enemy. Men are the majority in the rooms where decisions are made. For 2027, men must move from gatekeeping to partnership. If you are a party chairman, waive fees for women and mean it. If you are a governor, appoint women as commissioners for works, finance, and lands, not just women affairs. If you are a father, fund your daughter's campaign the way you fund your son's education. If you are a husband, share the home load so your wife can share the state load. If you are a youth leader, protect female aspirants at rallies. Equity is not women's work. It is democracy's work.

### 10. WHAT INSTITUTIONS MUST DO BEFORE 2027

INEC should audit the 2023 elections and publish a Gender Report. How many women bought forms? How many were substituted? How many reported violence? Publish it. Parties should adopt and publish a Gender Audit before primaries in 2026. How many women in exco? How many women delegates? How many women aspirants? No audit, no approval. The National Assembly should pass the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill. It has waited too long. The National Assembly should also pass independent candidacy. The National Orientation Agency should run a 24-month campaign: "Send Your Daughter to the Assembly." The private sector should create a 10 billion naira Women in Politics Fund, managed by a board of women with no party links. The media should commit to 50:50 coverage of male and female aspirants during primaries.

### CONCLUSION: 2027 IS NOT A DATE. IT IS A TEST

Gender equality gives women the right to run. Gender equity gives them the road to run on. For 2027, Nigeria must provide both. The challenges are real. The financial wall is high. The societal demands are heavy. The violence is targeted. The party gates are locked. But the cost of keeping women out is higher. We pay it in poor hospitals, broken schools, unsafe streets, and wasted talent.

The hope for women in politics in 2027 is not a wish. It is a plan. Cut the fees. Open the primaries. Secure the rallies. Fund the campaigns. Protect the candidates. Support the families. Tell the stories. Punish the abusers. Vote the women.

To every woman reading this: you are not too late and you are not alone. Start now. Pick your office. Find your sisters. Build your base. Raise your voice. Nigeria has waited for you. 2027 is not asking for permission. It is sending an invitation.

And to Nigeria: if we want different results, we must send different people. The future is not male or female. The future is competent, compassionate, and courageous. Women have all three. Give them the equity, and they will give us the country.

The table is ready. Let us complete it.

# Sports

● Football ● Athletics ● Golf ● Basketball ● Tennis ● Boxing

## 'Let Her Play' produces 30 talents in Lagos community

The 'Let Her Play' project has produced 30 budding football talents after a 10-week training programme at the New Maracana Sports Complex, Ajegunle, Lagos State.

In a statement on Tuesday, McAnthony Anaelechwku, Director-General of Ajeromi-Ifeodun Sports Council, said the project aimed to give girls equal access to football development pathways.



"This initiative was created to bridge the access gap and give young girls opportunities to develop their football talents in a structured environment," he said.

He said the programme trained 150 girls aged nine to 15, with 30 outstanding participants selected to form the Ajegunle Angels team.

"Out of 150 participants, we identified 30 exceptional talents

who will form Ajegunle Angels, a team we believe will make the community proud," he said.

Anaelechwku said the programme, which began in February, aimed to create structured football opportunities for girls in the community.

"Our goal was to provide a platform where girls can thrive in football while building confidence and discipline," he noted.

He added that the initiative achieved its aim, with participants showing remarkable growth in skill, confidence and teamwork.

"The transformation is impressive. Their skills, confidence and teamwork have improved significantly," he added.

Some participants expressed ambition to pursue football careers, with 13-year-old Chinaza Okafor aspiring to represent Nigeria.

"I want to play for Nigeria someday. This programme has

shown me that my dream is possible," she said.

Another participant said, "I am more confident now and my family supports my football journey."

The programme featured thrice-weekly training sessions, combining technical drills with life-skills education, including hygiene, self-esteem and academics.

"We ensured the girls were trained in football and equipped with essential life skills," Anaelechwku said.

He added the project would expand into coaching, refereeing and sports medicine to broaden career opportunities.

"We are looking beyond playing football and want to expose them to other career paths," he said.

The Lagos State Football Association supported the initiative, providing technical guidance throughout the programme.



DOUÉ NORMANDEZ

## CAF set to reappoint Doué as Head of Referees Committee

The Confederation of African Football (CAF) is reportedly set to reappoint Ivorian official Doué Normandez as Director of its Referees Committee, following internal discussions within the continental body.

Normandez had previously been removed from the position in August, when Congolese official Veron Omba, then CAF Secretary General, oversaw a leadership reshuffle that led to the appointment of Safar Kebene.

The change came in the aftermath of a complaint from the Royal Moroccan Football Federation, which called for re-

forms to the refereeing structure following controversies during women's football competitions hosted in Morocco last summer.

According to a CAF source, the Ivorian referee now enjoys strong backing from the FIFA Referees Committee, which is said to support his return as part of ongoing efforts to strengthen and develop refereeing standards across Africa.

The source further noted that Normandez was the last technical and development director appointed under FIFA supervision, prior to FIFA's reduced oversight of CAF refereeing structures in recent years.

## Real Madrid lose the plot after Bayern Munich defeat

Real Madrid's anguish soon turned to fury after full-time in their absorbing defeat by Bayern Munich on Wednesday night.

Referee Slavko Vincic was harangued by players from the beaten Spanish giants - seemingly furious at him for controversially sending off Eduardo Camavinga with the tie finely-poised at 4-4 on aggregate.

Vincic was pursued aggressively by a group of Real players as he marched towards the tunnel having blown the final whistle.

Arda Guler, who scored two brilliant goals on the night, was particularly incensed and had to be restrained by staff as he yelled in the Slovenian official's face.

Vincic then decided enough was enough and gave the Turkish talent a red card.

Antonio Rudiger and Vinicius Jr were also chief antagonists, with both seen leading the pursuit and lambasting Vincic.

The angry protests continued into the tunnel in chaotic scenes, with the beaten 15-time winners losing control of their emotions.

Earlier, Camavinga had come off the bench in the 62nd minute but received a second yellow by the 86th for foolishly preventing Bayern taking a quick free-kick.

It was a mindless act and the 10-man side were punished soon after, with Luis Diaz scoring before Michael Olise added a spectacular final goal in a 6-4 aggregate win, 4-3 on the night.

That decision, described by Marca as 'an injustice' in the

immediate aftermath, was the major source of anger.

Beaten Real boss Alvaro Arbeloa accused the referee of 'ruining the game'.

He told Spanish press: 'Obviously, you can't send off a player for something like that. The referee didn't even know he had a card and he ruined a very exciting, very evenly matched tie, a real battle, and that's how the game ended.'

When asked how Camavinga was, he added: 'Like everyone else.'



## Yussuf Alli impressed with athletes performance in Ibadan

### ● Commends MTN support for Nigeria athletics

Former Nigerian athlete and Chief Executive Officer of the Podium Performance Commission, Yussuf Alli (Oly), has expressed delight at the impressive display by athletes on Day One of the MTN Championships in Ibadan.

Alli, a respected figure in Ni-

gerian athletics, could not hide his admiration for the level of performance and commitment shown by the competitors, and was moved to shower praise on the athletes.

Speaking after the opening day's events, he noted that what stood out most was not just the results, but the passion

and hunger exhibited by the athletes.

"According to what I'm seeing here, the passion around the athletes is superb," he remarked, emphasizing the renewed energy and enthusiasm within the athletics community.

The MTN Championships, which continues to serve as a platform for discovering and nurturing young talents, attracted a large number of participants across various track and field events. From sprints to field events, athletes demonstrated determination and a strong desire to make their mark.

Yusuf Alli highlighted that such competitions are crucial on building the next generation of champions, noting that consistency in organizing events like the MTN Champs will go a long way in sustaining Nigeria's athletics development.



YUSSUF ALLI

## Athletics: Ghana to host 24th African senior athletics championships

Ghana has been officially confirmed as the host nation for the 24th edition of the African Senior Athletics Championships, marking a significant milestone for the country's sporting calendar.

The continental showcase is scheduled to take place from May 12 to May 17 at the University of Ghana Sports Stadium in Accra, where top athletes from across Africa are expected to converge to compete for honours.

The championship, organized under the auspices of the Confederation of African Athletics (CAA), will feature a wide range of track and field events, providing a platform for elite performers to showcase their talents on the continental stage.

Hosting the competition is seen as a major boost for Ghana's athletics development and infrastructure, while also offering local fans the opportunity to witness high-level competition firsthand.



GHANA ATHLETIC

## Lookman strike sends Atletico Madrid into Champions League semi-finals



ADEMOLA LOOKMAN

Nigeria's Ademola Lookman's 31st-minute goal on Tuesday night secured Atletico Madrid's aggregate victory over Barcelona, sending Diego Simeone's side into the Champions League semi-finals.

Atletico reached the semi-finals for the first time since 2016/2017 season after edging Barcelona 3-2 on aggregate.

Simeone's men held a 2-0 first-leg lead, but Barcelona erased the advantage within 25 minutes through Lamine Yamal and Ferran Torres.

A fine team move restored

Atletico's lead, with Lookman finishing calmly, as the hosts maintained composure in spite of Barcelona's early surge.

Barcelona showed little attacking threat in the second half, even after introducing Marcus Rashford and Robert Lewandowski.

Hopes of a comeback ended late when Eric Garcia was sent off for fouling Alexander Sorloth as the last defender.

Atletico will now face either Arsenal or Sporting in the semi-finals, with first-leg matches scheduled for April 28 or 29.

## PSG move into Champions League semi-finals with defeat of Liverpool

Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) defeated Liverpool 4-0 on aggregate in their UEFA Champions League quarter-final, with Ousmane Dembele scoring twice at Anfield to seal qualification for the semi-finals.

PSG, who held a two-goal advantage from the first leg, were tested by Liverpool in a lively encounter at Anfield.

Liverpool created scoring opportunities, with Marquinhos clearing Virgil van Dijk's effort off the line, while Alexis Mac Allister had a penalty decision overturned following a Video Assistant Referee (VAR) review.

Liverpool Manager, Arne Slot, made tactical adjustments, introducing Mohamed Salah for the injured Hugo Ekitike and starting Alexander Isak in a bid to spark a comeback.

Further substitutions, including Joe Gomez for Rio Ngunmoha, raised the tempo, but PSG's clinical finishing proved decisive.

Dembele extended PSG's lead in the 72nd minute, cutting inside to curl a left-footed shot into the bottom corner from outside the box.

He completed his brace in stoppage time, calmly finishing

from Bradley Barcola's cross to secure a comprehensive aggregate victory.

PSG will face either Bayern Munich or Real Madrid in the semi-finals, as Coach Luis Enrique's side extended their winning run to six matches.

Liverpool, meanwhile, excited the competition and will now focus on securing a top-five finish in the English Premier League to qualify for next season's UEFA Champions League



PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN CELEBRATE

## NIS South-South Zone officers hold weekly keep-fit exercise in Benin

Officials of the National Institute for Sports (NIS), South-South Zone, on Tuesday carried out their routine weekly keep-fit exercise at the Samuel Ogbemudia Stadium main bowl in Benin City, reaffirming their commitment to physical wellness and professional efficiency.

The exercise session, which featured a series of coordinated stretches, aerobic drills, and body conditioning routines, was conducted under the supervision of the Zonal Coordinator, Dr. Rasheed Oyakhire. Also present at the session

was the Executive Director of the Edo State Sports Commission, Mrs. Sabina Chikere, who represented the Chairman of the Commission during the exercise, further proves the collaborative spirit between sports institutions in the state.

Participants engaged actively in the fitness drills designed to enhance endurance, flexibility, and overall health.

Speaking during the exercise, NIS South-South coordinator, Dr. Oyakhire and the Edo State Sports Commission Executive Director, Mrs. Sabina emphasized the importance

of regular physical activity among staff, noting that maintaining good physical fitness is essential for productivity and effective service delivery within the Institute.

Oyakhire encouraged officers to remain consistent in participating in the weekly sessions, describing it as a vital component of workplace wellness culture.

The weekly keep-fit programme has become a regular feature among NIS South-South Zonal officers, fostering unity, discipline, and a shared commitment to healthy living.

## UEFA dismiss Barcelona's appeal against VAR intervention loss to Atletico Madrid



BARCELONA PLAYERS

Barcelona's complaint to UEFA over a "grave lack of VAR intervention" in the Champions League match against Atletico Madrid last week has been dismissed.

Hansi Flick's side were beaten 2-0 at Nou Camp but the Catalans filed a complaint to UEFA over the use of VAR in the game. Barcelona were denied a penalty in the 54th minute when Atletico defender Marc Puel handballed in the ball in the visitor's half and VAR did not intervene.

Puel had received a yellow card earlier in the game

and stopped the ball with his hand when it appeared that goalkeeper, Juan Musso had appeared to restart play with a goal-kick.

"The club considers that the refereeing did not adhere to the current law, directly influencing how the game progressed and the result," Barcelona said on Thursday.

However, on Tuesday, the UEFA Control Ethics and Disciplinary Body told the club that their petition was inadmissible. Both sides meet again on Tuesday night at the Riyadh Air Metropolitan Stadium.



GOV. AHMED ODODO

## Kogi Govt pledges support for basketball development

The Kogi State Government has pledged to prioritise the development of basketball in the state to boost the sport's profile and promote youth engagement.

The Commissioner for Youth and Sports Development, Monday Anyebe, made the pledge at the inauguration of the Kogi State Basketball Association on Tuesday in Lokoja.

Anyebe assured stakeholders of the government's commitment to the development of basketball under the administration of Gov. Ahmed Ododo.

Represented by the Director of Sports in the state, James Igah, the commissioner said the administration would focus on nurturing

basketball, particularly in rural areas, to enhance youth development.

He added that the government would collaborate with the association to promote sports development across the state.

Anyebe urged the newly inaugurated executives of the association to come up with innovative ideas to advance the sport.

Responding, the Chairman of the Kogi State Basketball Association, Mustapha Abdullahi, reaffirmed his commitment to the growth of basketball in the state.

Abdullahi, who is also the Director-General of the Energy Commission of Nigeria, commended the state government for its efforts in promoting sports development.

## Ekiti Queens return home as govt cautions supporters against hooliganism

The Ekiti State Government has warned supporters against acts of violence as Ekiti Queens FC return to the Oluyemi Kayode Stadium, Ado Ekiti, for their Matchday 15 clash against Pacesetter Queens.

The Technical Adviser on Sports Development to Gov. Biodun Oyebanji, Olusola Osetoba, gave the warning at a news conference on Tuesday in Ado Ekiti.

The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) reports that Ekiti Queens will be playing before their home fans for the first time this season after being banished to the MKO Abiola Stadium, Abeokuta,

Ogun, since Dec. 10, 2025.

Osetoba urged supporters to maintain order and decorum during the match.

NAN reports that Ekiti Queens will face their South-West rivals, Pacesetter Queens of Ibadan, in a Matchday 15 encounter scheduled for 4 p.m. on April 15.

The hosts go into the fixture with confidence, having secured a 2-0 victory in the reverse fixture in Ibadan through goals by Ismail Zainab and Winiifred Eyebhor.

Osetoba, while expressing excitement over the team's return, warned that any act of hooliganism could result in another ban on the team.



BARCELONA PLAYERS

# FEATURE

## Mobilising a generation: How Okpebholo is expanding youth pathways through Army recruitment advocacy

OGBEBOR TONY IKPONMWOSA

In a policy environment where youth engagement is increasingly viewed as a cornerstone of sustainable development, the Governor of Edo State, Monday Okpebholo, is advancing a deliberate and structured approach to connect young people with national service opportunities. His recent engagement with the Nigerian Army goes beyond a ceremonial interaction; it represents a calculated intervention designed to bridge the gap between opportunity and access for thousands of eligible youths across the state.

At the heart of this initiative is a high-level meeting held at the Government House in Benin City, where the governor received a delegation from the Nigerian Army as part of a nationwide sensitisation drive. While the campaign is aimed at increasing awareness and participation in the Army's ongoing recruitment exercise, within Edo State it has assumed a broader developmental dimension.

From the outset, Governor Okpebholo demonstrated a responsive leadership style, acknowledging the Army's outreach while promptly aligning state mechanisms to support the initiative. His reaction to the Army's correspondence received only shortly before the meetin reflected both urgency and preparedness. Rather than delay action, the governor affirmed that awareness efforts had already commenced, signalling an administration that is both proactive and execution-focused.

Central to the strategy is the deployment of state-owned media infrastructure. By directing the Edo Broadcasting Service to provide airtime for interviews, discussions, and public enlightenment programmes, the government is leveraging mass communication as a tool for civic mobilisation. This approach recognises that effective recruitment depends not only on eligibility criteria but also on the visibility, clarity, and accessibility of information.

Through structured broadcasts and targeted messaging, the campaign is expected to demystify the recruitment process by addressing common misconceptions, outlining requirements, and guiding prospective applicants through each stage. For many young people, especially first-time applicants, such clarity can make the difference between participation and missed opportunity.

Understanding the socio-geographic dynamics of Edo State, Governor Okpebholo has emphasised the importance of grassroots penetration. The involvement of local government structures introduces a decentralised framework for sensitisation, ensuring



HIS EXCELLENCY  
**SEN. MONDAY OKPEBHOLO**  
GOVERNOR OF EDO STATE

that information reaches communities often excluded from mainstream communication channels. This includes rural settlements where awareness levels may be low, but where there is a strong pool of physically capable and willing young individuals.

By activating these local governance networks, the state is effectively creating multiple access points for information dissemination. Community leaders, council offices, and local outreach programmes all become conduits through which the recruitment message flows. This layered communication model significantly enhances reach, inclusivity, and overall impact.

The broader implication of this initiative lies in its alignment with national priorities. As the Nigerian Army continues efforts to strengthen its human resource base amid evolving security challenges, sub-national support becomes increasingly critical. Edo State's active participation exemplifies how state governments can play a complementary role in advancing federal objectives, particularly in areas that intersect with youth development and national security.

For many young Nigerians, employment opportunities remain limited, and pathways to structured career development are often unclear. Military service, in this context, offers

*Edo is not merely contributing recruits to the Nigerian Army; it is shaping a disciplined, skilled, and purpose-driven cohort of citizens...*

more than a job; it provides training, discipline, education, and a clearly defined career trajectory. By promoting

recruitment, the Okpebholo administration is not only supporting national defence but also opening doors to personal advancement for youths in Edo State.

This dual impact—strengthening security while empowering young people—positions the initiative as a strategic intersection of policy priorities. It reflects an understanding that national development is most effective when human capital is actively engaged and productively deployed.

Furthermore, the governor's emphasis on exceeding recruitment targets introduces a performance-driven dimension to the campaign. It is not merely about participation, but about maximising Edo State's contribution to the national pool of recruits. This ambition is likely to drive intensified outreach, improved coordination, and sustained engagement throughout the recruitment cycle.

Equally significant is the psychological dimension of the campaign. By placing government backing behind the recruitment exercise, the administration confers legitimacy and prestige on military service. Young people are more likely to respond positively when they perceive alignment between state leadership and national institutions, particularly in initiatives that promise stability and growth.

As the sensitisation effort gains traction, early indicators suggest growing awareness among youths, reflected in increased inquiries and engagement across various platforms. If sustained, this momentum could translate into higher application rates and improved success outcomes for candidates from Edo State.

In the final analysis, Governor Okpebholo's intervention represents a model of integrated governance, where communication, community structures, and institutional partnerships converge to deliver tangible opportunities. It underscores the reality that effective leadership is not only about policy articulation but also about ensuring that such policies translate into meaningful outcomes for citizens.

For the young people of Edo State, the message is both clear and compelling: opportunities exist, access is expanding, and the pathway to national service is being actively paved.

By connecting aspiration with action, the state is nurturing a generation that is not only ready to serve but also equipped to excel.

Through this initiative, Edo is not merely contributing recruits to the Nigerian Army; it is shaping a disciplined, skilled, and purpose-driven cohort of citizens whose impact will extend far beyond the barracks into the broader fabric of national development.