

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WATCH

**(A focus on Nigeria's National Assembly.
Period ending February 2, 2013)**

Budget signing still pending:

Apparently Nigerians celebrated too early when the National Assembly set a record on the passage of the 2013 Appropriation Bill before the end of December 2012. This is because as of this day, the passed bill has not been signed by the president and as such the law is not in place and cannot be implemented.

Surprisingly, the federal legislators have not talked about the non-signing of the passed bill or made moves to override the veto of the president, if in fact the failure to sign amounts to a veto.

The saving grace though is that until the presidential assent, the president could authorise spending not more than what was spent in the corresponding period last year.

Farouk Lawan docked at last:

While the House of Representatives continues in its failure, negligence or refusal to conclude its investigation of the allegation of bribe acceptance by one of its own, Rep Farouk Lawan (PDP, Kano), law enforcement authorities arraigned the lawmaker and the secretary of his ad-hoc committee, Boniface Emenalo on Friday.

The matter was adjourned to Friday February 8 for ruling on the bail application by the accused persons who were ordered to be detained until that date.

Controversy at Constitution amendment session:

The planned public presentation by the House of Representatives of the synthesis of positions canvassed by a cross section of Nigerians during its recent public hearings in the 360 federal constituencies was called off at the last minute.

Members of civil society had gathered in the conference room of the House for the well-publicised event without the hosts turning up at the scheduled time. After hours of waiting, the speaker of the House, Rep. Aminu Tambuwal arrived with a few of his colleagues to apologise and announce the suspension of the event until further notice.

In his words: "...we (House leadership) have reviewed the process so far and realised that we cannot go ahead with this programme today. Just like any other thing associated with humans, there are hitches here and there. Especially here in the House of Representatives where this process has been acclaimed to be transparent thus far, we will not want a situation whereby at this stage there should be any issue that has to do with the total collated results of what needs to be presented to the public today."

Although some people have speculated that there is fear of manipulation of the outcome of the process to suit different political interests, the House, through its spokesperson, Rep.

Zakari Mohammed (PDP, Kwara) denied such. He said the delay was caused by late submission of collated results from some constituencies and the insistence by some members to cross-check the collated report to be sure it is a true reflection of what they gathered from the field.

Allegations of manipulation are not alien to the Constitution review process in Nigeria. In 2006, the process got entangled with the alleged attempt by President Olusegun Obasanjo to get a chance to amend the Constitution to allow him a third term as president. The build up of opposition to such move eventually led to the jettisoning of the entire amendment process after several months of debate and huge sums of budgetary funds (as well as alleged slush funds used to induce contenders on either side of arguments) had been spent.

The next amendment process in 2010/2011 also witnessed another round of controversy with the push for the independence of state legislature. There were allegations that state governors were uncomfortable with the independence of their legislatures and thus manipulated the same state legislatures to vote against their autonomy. Strangely, that particular amendment failed to pass as less than the required two-thirds of the state legislatures voted in support.

This time, the same bloc of state governors is being accused of trying to work against the seeming widespread demand for the autonomy of the local government as the third tier of government due to the current overbearing control by state governments.

House wants referendum for Bakassi people:

Nigeria may have finally lost Bakassi peninsular to Cameroon but the House of Representatives thinks the end is not here yet. On Thursday, it passed a resolution asking the Federal Government to conduct a referendum for people of the disputed territory.

The resolution followed the debate on a motion sponsored by Rep. Ekpenyong Ayi (PDP, Cross River) whose constituency includes Bakassi Local Government Area.

Ayi said following the judgment of the International Court of Justice in October 2001 transferring the territory to Cameroon and the failure of Nigeria to seek its review, it is imperative for the people of the territory to exercise their right to self determination, as provided in Article 1 of the 1966 International Convention on Civil and Political Rights.

He further relied on Article 3 of the Green Tree Agreement signed between Nigeria and Cameroon at the handover of the territory. That treaty obligates Cameroon after the transfer of authority to guarantee Nigerians living in Bakassi Peninsula the exercise of their fundamental rights and freedom as enshrined in the International Human Rights Law and other relevant provisions of international law.

It remains to be seen how this resolution could be implemented by the Nigerian government when it no longer exercises jurisdiction over the land in question. This may only just add to the long list of resolutions of our legislature that end the moment the resolution is passed and remain unenforceable.

Reps demand alternative water source for Ezu Community:

Following the recent discovery of more than 20 fresh corpses floating in Ezu River in Anambra State, the House of Representatives has asked the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to work in conjunction with the Federal Ministry of Water Resources to immediately provide alternative water source to the affected communities.

Considering the motion moved by Rep. Chukwuemeka Nwogbo (APGA, Anambra), the House also urged security agencies to determine the causes of deaths while calling on health authorities to stem any possible epidemic outbreak in the affected areas.

National Assembly approves deployment of troops to Mali:

The Senate has approved the deployment of 1,200 soldiers to Mali for peace keeping operations following request from President Goodluck Jonathan, pursuant to the provisions of the Constitution.

The soldiers have since joined the African-led force known as AFISMA, to participate in limited combat duties in Mali.

Justifying his request, President Jonathan said the deployment of Nigerian troops was in line with the United Nations Security Council resolution 2085(2012) and the need to combat armed and terrorist groups and their activities. He said it is also to stem the proliferation of weapons from within and outside the region with grave consequences on the security and stability in the northern parts of Mali and beyond, including Nigeria.

He stressed that the proximity of Nigeria to the Sahel region put it at great risk of the exacerbation of its current security challenges due to a possible spill over from the insurgents in Mali with negative consequences on collective security, political stability and development efforts.

Senate Okays two new nominees for minister:

The Senate has approved two new nominees of President Goodluck Jonathan for appointment as ministers. They are Kabiru Tanimu Turaki from Kebbi State and Prof. Chinedu Nebo from Enugu State.

The two nominees replace Dr. Haliru Mohammed who was sacked as Minister of Defence about eight months ago and Prof. Barth Nnaji who resigned as Minister of Power about six months ago.

House to probe Ezekwesili's allegation:

The House of Representatives has mandated its committees on Finance and Appropriation to investigate the allegations of squandering of \$67 billion of Nigeria's Foreign Reserves and Excess Crude Account levelled against the federal government by former Vice-President of the World Bank, Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili.

Ezekwesili, who served in the President Obasanjo Administration, had at a recent convocation lecture alleged that the Yar'Adua and Jonathan administrations mismanaged

\$45 billion in Foreign Reserves and \$22 billion in Excess Crude Account it inherited from former President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration in 2007.

The decision of the House was based on a motion sponsored by the Chairman, House Committee on Interior, Rep. Umar Bature (PDP, Sokoto) who argued that given the weight of the allegations and the pedigree of Ezekwesili, it was important for the House to find the truth in the charge.

Rep. Bature was worried that the response of the government failed to address the allegation but focused on trying to impeach the integrity of the accuser.

SGF briefs Senate on Nigeria's centenary celebrations:

The Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF) Anyim Pius Anyim has briefed the Senate on federal government's plans to celebrate the centenary of the present composition of Nigeria as a country, the high point of which is the plan to build a Centenary City.

The planned new city to be sited within Abuja is, according to Anyim, modelled after Dubai, Monaco and Singapore and is "conceived to focus the attention of the investing world in Nigeria" and "the city will reintroduce Abuja to the world," he said.

Anyim said the centenary project would feature commemorative events, historical and heritage programmes in Abuja, state capitals and some historic towns and cities in Nigeria but would be financed by private sector investors.

He told the senators that "we will hold investors forum where investors are expected to decide the commemorative projects such as the New Abuja City Gate, Ceremonial Arcade (Unity Square) and Presidential Retreat". Interestingly the new Abuja City Gate is part of the project later included in the proposed budget of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) administration for which N7.5 billion has been proposed.

The SGF said the briefing was to present the proposal to the Senate, to make its input before preparations for the programme.

Senate President, David Mark, expressed the hope that the project would be successfully completed without recourse to public funds, saying if, as the SGF stated, government would not commit its funds to the project, there was no need for further discussion by the senators.

"Truly then we have no reason for this briefing. It is entirely a private sector driven exercise or business...If the idea is just to keep us abreast of what government is doing, then there is no need for question and answer or further discussion. But my worry is let it not appear that somewhere along the line we have been committed and then there is financial involvement".

He then asked those with suggestions to send to the committee "and they can make suggestions and give to the businessmen, if they are interested, they buy".

After House threat, electoral chief explains absence:

The Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof. Attahiru Jega, has blamed 'communication gap' for his failure to appear before the House of Representatives Committee on Public Accounts, a failure which recently caused the reps to threaten him with arrest.

In a letter to the chairman of House Committee on Public Accounts, Jega said his "failure to respond to your committee's invitation was wholly unintended and regrettable. I had travelled out of the country for a while and only returned to office early this week; and there was apparently a communication gap that made me unaware of the invitation to appear before the honourable committee on Wednesday". He said he only heard of the threat of arrest from the media that morning.

Even though he assumed office in 2010, Prof Jega is expected to appear before the committee to explain the expenditure of the commission between 2003 and 2011, following the queries raised by the Auditor General of the Federation on INEC's accounts, within that period.

Senators angry over FCT plan to construct First Lady's office for N4billion:

As the debate on the 2013 budget of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) opened in the Senate, many senators expressed disapproval with the plan by the FCT Administration to spend N4 billion to construct an office for the African First Ladies Mission chaired by the wife of Nigeria's president, Mrs. Patience Jonathan.

The crux of their anger was the fact that the Nigerian Constitution accorded no form of recognition or responsibility to the wife of a serving president (known as first lady) and did not create any office for the person. They reasoned therefore that appropriating funds to the 'office' by law was illegal.

The N253 billion Appropriation Bill of the FCT allocates N155 billion to capital expenditure, N49 billion to overhead costs and N48 billion to personnel costs. The details include the allocation of N7.5 billion for the construction of the Abuja city gate as well as N150 million for the renovation of vice-president guest house in Asokoro, Abuja.

Interestingly, the construction of a new city gate for Abuja is one of the projects listed by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation as part of the centenary celebration of Nigeria for which he said the cost would be fully borne by private businesses.

Condemning the allocation for the African First Ladies Mission, Sen. Babajide Omoworare (ACN, Osun) described the allocation as 'scandalous', an aberration and a misplaced priority.

To buttress his position, he reminded his colleagues that each federal university was granted just N1 billion in the 2013 budget.

The position was supported by Sen. Babafemi Ojudu (ACN, Ekiti) who argued that the allocation, in the face of rising unemployment was a misplacement of priority, a situation he

said often led to the abuse of lawmakers in the social media and warned that that posterity would not forgive them if they approved the allocation.

In their contributions, Senate Deputy Leader, Sen. Abdul Ningi (PDP, Bauchi) questioned how much it would cost to build a new guest house for the vice president if renovation alone could gulp N150 while Sen. Ayogu Eze (PDP, Enugu) said the FCT budget was often unjustifiable when compared with its impact.

Senate President David Mark observed that the FCT administration did not usually get its priorities right before earmarking money for projects. He then referred the budget to the Senate Committees on Appropriation, Finance and FCT with two weeks' deadline to report back.

