

Nigeria: Dogara - N'Assembly Will Study 2014 Audit, Ensure Appropriate Punishment for Corruption Cases

By Ndubuisi Francis

Abuja — The National Assembly is to study and follow through the recently released 2014 Auditor's Report to ensure that justice is served on anyone or group with proven cases of corruption or lack of transparency.

Among others, the report which was recently submitted to the parliament by the Auditor-General of the Federation, Samuel Ukura, had claimed that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) did not remit N3.2 trillion in 2014.

Speaking in Abuja yesterday at the 13th African Organisation of Supreme Audit Institution (AFROSAI) E-Governing Meeting for English-speaking African countries, the Speaker, House of Representatives, Hon. Yakubu Dogara,

promised that the House was committed to the implementation of the Auditor General's Report.

"This is because the Auditor-General's Report is a major instrument of legislative oversight over activities of all organs of government, and has capacity to check corruption and abuse of office.

"As I said elsewhere, the auditor-general has just released the 2014 Auditor's Report. I can assure Nigerians that the National Assembly will study the report and cause same to be thoroughly investigated and would ensure that any proven cases of corruption or lack of transparency or accountability is appropriately dealt with," Dogara said.

The Speaker, who was represented by the Chairman, House Committee on Public Accounts, Hon. Chinda Kingsley Ogundu, noted that one of the major challenges of leadership in Africa, particularly in Nigeria was how to institute transparency and accountability in all spheres of government business both at the national and state levels.

Dogara stated that this was the only way to ensure that "our people enjoy the full benefits of democracy and good governance."

According to him, it was for this reason that the present government was tackling corruption issues head-on with the active support of the legislature.

"Government is building structures and strengthening legislations that will eliminate corruption and ensure prudent management of government resources, for the benefit of all.

"We are partnering with the international community to achieve this. The era that government sat by and watched our common resources being plundered by those responsible for their custody is gone," Dogara stated.

He disclosed that the House had recently passed a new audit law to provide for additional powers to strengthen the Office of the Auditor-General of the Federation.

"We sincerely hope and believe that this will give the Auditor-General added impetus for improved efficiency and effectiveness to deliver," he said.

The Speaker noted that all over the world, the emphasis is on transparency in government, noting that African countries can no longer afford not to be counted among those with zero tolerance for corruption.

He regretted that Transparency International has remained very critical of African governments due to the perception that leaderships on the continent are lukewarm in fighting corruption and punishing the vice.

Dogara noted that corruption continues to thrive in Africa because auditors appear to lack the necessary skills, competence and professionalism to effectively exercise appropriate control over government finances and expenditure.

In his address at the five-day meeting with the theme "Leadership Driving Action", the Auditor-General of the Federation, Samuel Ukura said the meeting provided a forum for sharing knowledge and experiences among member countries, noting that Nigeria was hosting it for the first time in the West Africa sub-region.

Ukura noted that the challenges facing Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) and public sector audit have no national limitations.

"SAIs across the world are facing various challenges among which are their independence, encompassing financial as well as administrative independence.

"On this aspect, SAI-Nigeria faces serious issues of human resource and financial independence in the absence of a viable audit bill," Ukura said.

He disclosed that the Audit Amendment Bill had been passed by the House of Representatives, adding that what was remaining was for the Senate to concur before the president's assent.

"Once that is done, the Office of the Auditor-General will have more powers to sanction some people and organisations and reject certain expenditure. As it is now, we don't have the autonomy.

"The other autonomy we are talking about is administrative and financial autonomy. Now we send our budget to the Finance Ministry before they send it to the National Assembly for consideration and those are institutions we audit. How can somebody you audit determine your expenditure? That is not independence.

"On administrative autonomy, we need to employ our staff, discipline them and promote them and when you look at the good ones, you encourage them. As it is now, only staff from Grade levels 4-6 can be employed and the staff from Grade level 7 and above cannot be employed by the Auditor general but the Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC)..

"And so, when there is any disciplinary cases against a staff from level 7 and above, we have to send it to FCSC and they do not understand the exact reasons why that person was disciplined, and so there could be a lot of manipulations. In other climes they have the power to hire and fire.

This particular independence requires amendment of the Constitution. It was amended during the last assembly but when it got to President Jonathan, he did not sign it into law.

"The financial autonomy was included in the 36 states that Auditor-General finances should be on the direct line charge on Consolidated Revenue Fund. After it was not signed, they have to start afresh," Ukura stated.

Meanwhile, Ukura has blamed the recent clashes between herdsmen and communities across the country on the effect of the drying up of Lake Chad, which forced herdsmen to look for succour down south.

"We did an environmental audit on the drying up of Lake Chad. The drying up of Lake Chad is what has constituted to insurgency in the country because the people there were fishermen, farmers, cattle rearers and there were grazing reserves and today, they are no longer fishermen, farmers and so they have to live. They have to go to other places.

"It was a joint environmental audit done by Niger, Cameroun Chad and Nigeria and we submitted the report to all the countries, to the National Assembly and the President as well as ECOWAS," he disclosed.

He noted that another report had indicated that the River Niger will dry up if necessary measures were not taken to avert the impending situation.

"There is a report that says River Niger will dry up in some decades. When it dries up, Nigeria will have a big problem. Substantial part of electricity is generated from Kainji Dam and when it dries up, it means that what happened at Lake Chad will be happening in that part of the country as there will be no water to power those turbines," he noted. .

Ukura also recommended deliberate increase in water volume, and dredging, among others to restore Lake Chad, noting that some rivers hitherto supplying water were diverted.

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