THE OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY

OF THE 2022/2023 LEGAL YEAR

ADDRESS DELIVERED BY

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HON. ATTORNEY GENERAL AND COMMISSIONER FOR JUSTICE, EDO STATE

AT

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PROTOCOLS

INTRODUCTION;

It gives me great pleasure to once again be part of this noble tradition, to mark the start of a new legal year. An occasion like this gives us the opportunity to reflect and examine the activities of the last one year with the aim of building on previous achievements and avoiding past challenges.

As always, I am grateful to God for the chance to be present at the start of another legal year. In the previous year we suffered the devastating loss of a number of our colleagues, both of the official and private B ar and as we reflect on the previous year and look to the future, we must also acknowledge their passing.

May their souls rest in perfect peace!

As a new legal year begins, our mind turns to the enduring success of our legal system over the years, with judicial independence and the Rule of Law at its heart.

We would like to formally express our gratitude to the Edo State Judiciary for the robust collaboration and the co-operation the Ministry of Justice and indeed the entire executive arm of Government have received within the last year in enhancing our efforts to provide access to quality justice for all of our citizens.

2021/2022 in Retrospect

The Ministry of Justice has always prided itself on being the sword and shield of the Government of Edo State. The sword, to enforce its laws and the shield, to protect the Government and its agencies from the arrows of "enemies".

As the largest law chambers in Edo State, the Ministry of Justice has under my watch re-engineered its processes and personnel deployment with a view to ensuring that the large pool of professional competencies available within the ministry are leveraged upon to provide efficient, cost-effective and fit-for-purpose legal service, utilizing the most modern tools available in any world class environment.

Over the last year, the Ministry of Justice has been greatly aided by the Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption programme (RoLAC), funded by the European Union, with the British Council as implementing partner. RoLAC has vigorously supported numerous justice initiatives of the Ministry and we are grateful for the support.

Poised to uphold the rule of law in a highly populated and multi-religious metropolis, in the last legal year, the Ministry of Justice reviewed and replaced out-dated laws in order to modernize our legal code. we will shortly have cause to speak on the modernization of our legal code further. In the last legal year, the Ministry of Justice also continued in its commitment to enhancing the functions of pro-people directorates, teams

and committees across the justice sector such as the Department of Citizens' Rights and the Citizens' Mediation Centre in the Ministry of Justice, as well as the Justice Sector Reform Team, all of which were created to improve the quality of justice service delivery and offer free legal services in civil and criminal matters to the poor and the vulnerable, ensuring that no one is defenseless irrespective of whatever part of the country they come from, whatever language they speak and whatever the level of their means.

The Administration of His Excellency, Mr. Godwin Obaseki, through the Ministry of Justice has also continued to fund the Administration of Criminal Justice Monitoring Committee in its Annual budget, a feat that is a first among any of the states in the Federation.

My Lords and distinguished guests, permit me to speak in more detail on some of our initiatives at the Ministry of Justice in the last legal year aimed at improving the administration of Justice.

Law Reform

In the past one year, there have been ground-breaking and fundamental activities on the legislative agenda of Government, which process has been led by the Ministry of Justice and assisted by our development partners.

In particular, the Bills which originated in the Ministry of Justice and have gone through the mills to become the law of the land include;

- Criminal Code Law
- Justice Sector Reform Team Law
- Electricity Commission Law
- Electricity Regulatory Agency Law
- Forestry Commission Law
- Edo State Parks and Gardens Law

- Town and Country Planning Regulatory Agency Law
- Disability Rights Law
- Building Country & Development Agency Law

These laws are an essential part of the agenda of the current administration in setting up the required legal architecture for a forward looking, investment-friendly and rule-based society for the benefit of our generations yet unborn. In particular, we wish to highlight the unprecedented total reform of our substantive criminal law which has resulted in the new Edo State Criminal Law which has been recently passed into law by the Edo State House of Assembly.

Let me here acknowledge the instrumental roles played by My Lord the Hon. Chief Judge as Chair of the Administration of Criminal Justice Monitoring Committee and my Lord Hon. Justice Efe Ikponmwonba, the chairperson of the Justice Sector Reform Team, in ensuring the swift passage of critical Justice Reform Bills by the State House of Assembly.

Those familiar with our criminal laws will know that the last time there was such a comprehensive review of our criminal laws was around 50 years ago. These current efforts bring our criminal laws in line with global best practices.

Another critical pillar of the activities of government in the legal sphere is the establishment of the Private Property Protection Committee which is one of governments initiatives targeted at enhancing access to swift and effective justice services for victims of land grabbing. The Private Property Protection Committee, Prosecution Unit and Law enforcement officers reflects the thinking of the state government through the Ministry of Justice in using the instrumentality of the law to reduce the stress that Edo residents pass through at the hands of land speculators. Interestingly, the state government is poised to enforce the Private Property Protection law against anyone found wanting, no matter how highly placed in the society.

This will be a good point to address what has become (within the legal community) the big elephant in the room. Recently, the government has had to take hard but necessary steps to take back our city from the hands of reckless criminal gangs masquerading as land grabbers whose activities threaten to turn our city into one huge ungoverned and unplanned urban slum. I most note that at this point that available evidence further indicates that there is an intersection in the data between those engaged in the unholy trinity activities of land grabbing, cultism and violent crimes.

No responsible government would raise its hands in surrender while non-state actors engage in damaging activities that threaten our common patrimony and constitute a dis-incentive to the attraction of private investment. The forgoing are the underpinnings of the recent actions taken by government to retrieve the peoples' land hijacked by criminal gangs, some of which have been sold to gullible persons who would purchase land and carry out development thereon without even a simple search at the Edo GIS which would have revealed the true title to the land and the existence of a new town layout designed to enhance the orderly growth of our city.

It is a common saying that "you do not make omelets, without breaking a few eggs" and we must therefore send the word out that this administration has no intention of going back on its determination to combat land grabbing in all its pernicious forms and to ensure that all who profit from it pay a very high price for their anti-social activities.

We would plead therefore with our mother association, the LION BAR to recognize that government is not the enemy here and to resist the temptation to get drawn into battle on the side of persons who manipulate the system to damage the common good. We have no fear or objection to meeting any legitimate claimants in the courts. That is as it should be.

To paraphrase the famous observation of the Supreme Court in **DOKUBO-ASARI V. FRN (2007) 12 NWLR (PT.1048) 320;** no individual's profit motive or pecuniary interest can override the commitment of the common good of society as a whole.

Capacity Building

As part of efforts to build a modern public service that will drive critical reforms in the state as well as diligently and effectively provide quality justice service, capacity building at the Ministry of Justice has remained a priority under my leadership. Over the past year, various state counsel attended numerous capacity development engagements including developing a Practice Direction for the Hon. Chief Judge of Edo State on the implementation of provisions of the VAPP Law of Edo State 2021 in relation to protection orders. This activity occurred in January and then in June of 2022, with support from the RoLAC Programme and was aimed at ensuring the full implementation of key provisions of the VAPP Law. In February of 2022, the Ministry of Justice partnered with the RoLAC Programme in organizing a series of training workshops for staff of the Ministry on operationalizing case management. These hands-on practical sessions were instrumental in enhancing the capacity of participants from the Ministry to effectively implement digital case management and tracking as is currently being done in the Ministry. In the week of March 21st – 25th, 2022, State counsel from the Ministry of Justice were trained by RoLAC on the principle of Restorative Justice and its effective facilitation. On the 5th of May 2022, Department of Public Prosecutions of the Ministry of Justice facilitated an engaging capacity development workshop for 45 Prosecutors and investigators on effective criminal prosecution, trial advocacy and effective coordination between investigators and prosecutors. The Chairperson of the Justice Sector Reform Team, My lord Justice Efe Ikponwonmba, facilitated a very engaging session with participants at this meeting.

These trainings were all aimed at increasing the effectiveness of State Counsel in justice service delivery.

Case Management

In the last legal year, the Ministry of Justice has enjoyed the support of RoLAC in developing a digital case management system for its Department of Public Prosecutions. As a result of the above, case files are now being scanned electronically and stored in the cloud. We are also now able to keep better track of the status and progress of our cases, thereby ensuring improved accountability.

The Citizens' Mediation Centre

With over 40 trained mediators employed in the Ministry of Justice, we have a pool of in house mediators, many of who operate in our Citizens' Mediation Department.

In the last year, the Department concluded several mediations, including family issues, breach of contract, landlord and tenant issues, inheritance, payment of solicitors fees, child abuse and domestic violence. The services offered by this department have remained absolutely free and are targeted at the most vulnerable in society. This court-connected mediation integrates assisted out of court settlements into our court system, thereby introducing non-adversarial justice which aims to decongest our courts of cases that can be settled amicably, while protecting relationships.

Establishment of Zonal Offices

In order to ensure that justice service delivery is closer to citizens and more responsive, in the last year, the Ministry of Justice set up functional offices in the three senatorial zones of the state. These offices are manned by state counsel permanently deployed to each of the zones. This initiative would ensure that the issue of state counsel being absent from courts in the zones as a result of their having to travel from Benin would be a thing of the past.

Efforts at combating Human Trafficking

The war against trafficking in persons in Nigeria and particularly in Edo State is in no way an easy one. In the last legal year, several measures have been employed by the Ministry of Justice to address the proliferation of the crime in Edo State, particularly in relation to enhancing effective investigation and prosecution of offenders. One of the landmark achievements of the Edo State Government in this regard was securing the conviction, sentencing and imprisonment of three notorious Human traffickers in the case of **AGF V. OSARO RASHEED & 3 OTHERS CHARGE NO: B/CD/198C/18**, prosecuted by of the Edo State Ministry of Justice and the Edo State Taskforce against Human Trafficking. Judgement in the case was delivered on the 9th of December 2021, by my Lord Hon. Justice G. O. Imadegbelo sitting in Criminal Court 2, Benin City. This was the first trafficking case filed by the state Government in 2018 when the State Government through its Taskforce against Human Trafficking commenced the prosecution of trafficking offences.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence Efforts

As a nation, we have continued to grapple with the menace of Sexual and Gender Based Violence. I must at this point, acknowledge the concerted effort of our First Lady, Her Excellency, Mrs Betsy Obaseki who, very courageously, drives the fight against GBV in the state.

On its part, the Ministry of Justice has continued in its deep commitment to ensuring the prompt and effective prosecution, naming and shaming of offenders, and to this end, in the last legal year, the Ministry constituted a high powered prosecuting team saddled with the responsibility of handling GBV cases. The Prosecuting team has received special training from NAPTIP and RoLAC to enhance its capacity and effectiveness.

The Prison Watch Unit

The Prison Watch Unit of the Citizens'Rights Department of the Ministry of Justice works in collaboration with the office of the Public Defenders of the Benin Branch of the Nigerian Bar Association (OPD) in making recommendations and applications to the courts for bail, variation of bail in stringent cases and the general provision of free legal services for inmates in the custody of the Nigeria Corrections Service. This unit has within the last legal year worked assiduously in partnership with the Legal Aid Coordinating Team (LACT) and with support from the RoLAC Programme in rendered *pro bono* services to inmates resulting in the decongestion of Custodial Centers in Benin.

During the past legal year we have secured the release of _____ inmates from Oko Prison, _____ inmates from Benin Prisons, and _____ inmates from the remand home.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES HEADING INTO THE 2022/2023 LEGAL YEAR

My Lords, and distinguished guests, in 2022/2023, the ministry of Justice shall continue to pursue more reform initiatives.

By this time next year, we hope to be able to proudly present a very efficient ministry with fully functional departments. We also should have an effective witness support system in place. Similarly, we hope to have perfected our prison decongestion process, so as to ensure that only those that should be in prison are in fact there. In implementing the provisions of the ACJL, it is hoped that the necessary relationships between the Judiciary, the Ministry, the Police and the Correctional Services will function seamlessly.

We achieved some successes in the last legal year with our case management processes. We currently scan casefiles and documents and save in the cloud, and are better able to track the progress of our cases. We

hope to deepen these successes and perfect efficient case management practices as a ministry.

In the new legal year, we also hope to fully staff and equip our zonal offices to function somewhat independently of the head office.

In seeking to achieve these and other reform initiatives aimed at effective justice service delivery, we will incorporate these strategic priorities:

Training for improved Public Engagement

Customer Care and Appropriate Conduct

The Ministry of Justice is poised, as part of its accountability approach, to develop a Code of Conduct for Staff which will target conduct impacting on the rendering of justice services. This document is not intended to displace the Code of Conduct for Public Officers, but to complement it, while targeting high professionalism within the Ministry.

Harnessing Information Technology

Since the year 2020 introduced Covid-19 to the world, technology that permits virtual proceedings and remote research has become *sine qua non* in our work as a ministry. In the new legal year, the Ministry of Justice intends to embark on a programme to provide extensive electronic infrastructure for counsel in the ministry. In 2022/2023, we hope that we will improve our electronic infrastructure to the point where to maximize limited time, we are able to conduct remote research swiftly and attend vital meetings virtually.

Furthermore, leveraging on the obvious benefits of the case management system RoLAC supported us in developing and deploying for our DPP, the Ministry is currently finalizing plans for the deployment of a robust Information Management System across key departments within the

Ministry of Justice, which will be used for Case Management, and data gathering for purposes of automating the production of the ministries periodic reports, research and data/evidence driven policy making. This will also include the ensuring easy access and oversight on the activities and outputs of different departments and units within the ministry by the leadership directly from their systems and mobile devices. The information management system will also include document management, storage, and a resource repository. This step is in line with the current position of Government on the implementation of digitization of processes within the State civil service.

The new Information Management System which we hope to launch in this legal year is a suite of integrated applications and solutions designed to automate key business processes across various departments in the ministry. The system which is designed to closely mirror the current procedures in the Ministry will cater for the following key processes within the Ministry:

- Data Gathering, Analytics and Reporting suite for Planning and Research Development
- Case Management System for the Civil Litigation cases
- Case Management System, designed for mediation and arbitration procedure. (Covering the Citizens Rights and the Citizens Mediation Departments)
- Bespoke electronic Document Management System and resource repository
- And of course, the integration of the Department of Public Prosecutions Case Management System into the Information Management System for purposes of having a comprehensive

overview of cases received, ongoing, and completed across different departments of the ministry in one central portal.

Provision of reward mechanisms for staff

In the new legal year, we will dedicate resources to developing and implementing a mechanism of rewarding hardworking and exemplary staff, in a bid to encourage excellence among counsel, thereby enhancing the quality of justice service delivery.

LINKAGES WITH PARTNERS

In the new year, we hope to continue to partner with other justice stakeholders and institutions such as the Justice Sector Reform Team, The Administration of Criminal Justice Monitoring Committee, development partners and others in actualizing the improvements we want to see in out justice sector.

These collaborations will have the effect of humanising our institutions, building our efficiency and bringing our work to the doorstep of the people we exist to serve.

Conclusion

In conclusion My Lords, and distinguished guests, I renew my personal pledge and the pledge of the Edo State Ministry of Justice, to be untiring in our efforts to live up to our mission to provide access to quality justice. We will endeavour, as much as it lies in our power, to follow through on our plans outlined for 2022/2023, and continue to strive to position ourselves to attain the stature of a resilient and accountable institution.

And now my Lords, and distinguished guests, permit me to express special gratitude to His Excellency the Governor, The Honourable Chief Judge, The Speaker and members of the House of Assembly, Members of the State

Executive Council and all our stakeholders who in diverse ways have assisted us in our everyday work, and also in our reform agenda.

Lastly, I thank God for the provision of His vast resources that has enabled us to move forward in our reform/modernization agenda.

On that note, My Lords, and distinguished guests, I wish us all a healthy, happy, peaceful and productive new legal year.

Thank you for your attention!

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