

ADDRESS BY DR. ABUBAKAR BUKOLA SARAKI, THE EXECUTIVE GOVERNOR OF KWARA STATE AND CHAIRMAN NIGERIA GOVERNORS' FORUM AT THE 1ST RETREAT OF THE NIGERIA GOVERNORS' FORUM, 2007

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Governors and Honourable Ministers

Your Excellencies, Invited Guests and Participants

Dear Colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen

The success of every country that has achieved development can be traced back to a date, and a place; when and where individual actors, political elite, people like us, decided to re-examine themselves, question orthodox views, confront traditional challenges, create a new vision of society, and devise new ways of solving old problems. This forum provides us with the opportunity to create that decisive moment of history.

The event for which we are gathered here today, the retreat of governors of states in Nigeria, is probably the first of its kind in our country's recent history. And coming at this point in our national life, it therefore represents the collective desire of leadership at our level, to rededicate itself to the task of nation building and be the vanguard of the national desire to claim the 21st century as the Nigerian century.

His excellency, the president of federal republic of Nigeria, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'adua has declared his resolve to ensure that by the year 2020, Nigeria becomes one of the 20 top economies in the world, 2020 is a mere 13 years away. But this is a task that must be accomplished. By the year 2020, our country will be 60 years old as an independent country. At 60, we must be prepared to claim our destiny; the destiny to stand tall and strong as the leader of the black race anywhere in the world. We have the ability and the resources to succeed. But we must back these with an iron resolve to achieve success.

Our president has declared his commitment to provide the leadership that we need to drive the vision 2020. Yet, so much would depend on our own resolve to provide the inevitable complementary leadership. As the second tier of government in our federation, the intent and purpose of our existence is to bring governance closer to the people of our country. Therefore if the real impact of government is to be felt, we at the states must be prepared to deliver on the expectations of our people and possess the ability and the means to do so. It follows, therefore that if the people must enjoy the real benefits of our national resources, we must be prepared to devolve sufficient quotient of our national resources to the states, to enable us make the necessary investments in improving the lives of our people, especially in the areas of health and education.

We are gathered here today as governors of 36 varying states with varying cultures and configurations: but we are united by our common nationhood; and even more united by the common concerns and aspirations of our people. The challenges that we face are the same: the aspirations of our people for a

better quality of life, for separation from poverty, for freedom from diseases, for a greater future are the same.

Therefore, as we confront these challenges in our respective domains, there is so much to share with one another, and there is so much to learn from our various experiences. I believe that a reduction in poverty in one corner of our country is a reduction of poverty in all of our country and the prevalence of poverty in one corner of our country is a prevalence of poverty in all our country. The concept of 'peer sharing' based on collaboration and cooperation is therefore a critical strategy that we should all eagerly embrace in bringing development to our people, we recognise that our greatest resources are the people of our country. Therefore, our framework for development must mainstream the development of the human person. Increased productivity and economic growth are critical to development, but these have to be driven by the people and for the people.

Also, i must not fail to mention one issue that is of great concern to majority of us today, and which touches directly on our ability to prosecute any reforms and actions that may be prescribed from this retreat. That is the issue relating to our credibility profile as state governors.

In the last few months, issues involving some of our colleagues both in the immediate past and at the present have challenged our collective integrity.

Permit me to note that even if one of us is indicted, the rest of us stand suspected and therefore, stand in danger of losing the credentials to drive the changes that are necessary and to call for the sacrifices that are important. We must therefore make determined and conscious efforts to improve our credibility rating on issues concerning transparency and accountability, not only among our people, but also in the eyes of the world, if we must be able to mobilize the level of support and partnership that we require to pursue the huge task ahead. By accepting to lead, we have also accepted the responsibilities that go with leadership and with power. These responsibilities are not only to our people and to the world, but also to ourselves and to our god.

My colleagues, the future that we dream of can only come out of the choices and the sacrifices that we make today. One of the great choices we have made is that we have accepted to serve. The great sacrifice that we must make is to be prepared to forgo some of our comforts today so that our children can enjoy them tomorrow.

The thematic pre-occupation of this retreat has been carefully mapped out to respond to those issues that are critical to effective governance at the state level, and for efficient operation of our federalism. Some of the key thematic areas include the issues of fiscal federalism and effective financing strategy; internally generated revenue and debt portfolio management; the critical governance issues on accountability, transparency and the rule of law; the issue of national security, parliamentary relations and micro-financing; the issues around fiscal balancing and equity, among others, that seek to provide strategies for delivering quality health and education, not only as key elements of reducing poverty, but also as ends in themselves. It is my hope that this meeting will produce a broad template that we all can adapt in response to our peculiar challenges as we know them in our respective states.

The speakers and resource persons have also been carefully selected, giving considerations to those with high level of technical expertise and robust experiences on the various issues to be considered. In addition to the plenary, the syndicate groups and working sessions will also provide opportunities to deepen discussions around the key issues and distil practicable action plans that will guide our tasks in the years ahead.

At this juncture, i will like to express our sincere gratitude to his Excellency, the president of the federal republic of Nigeria, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'adua, for taking the time to be present among us here today, and for the good leadership he has provided since he took office a couple of months back. Mr. President, we thank you most sincerely.

I will also like to thank the various chairmen of sessions and our erudite speakers and the rapporteurs for agreeing to partner with us on this retreat and to share their time, expertise and experiences with us on the various issues that would assist us in bringing real development to our people.

This forum that we are about to begin today, is indeed an opportunity for us to re dedicate ourselves to the pledges that we have all solemnly made, and have all solemnly meant: the service of the millions of our people who suffer daily under the burden of grinding poverty, disease and ignorance; the service of our country that so richly deserves to be served; and the service to our god who has given us the unique privilege to serve. For you all, and for me, i say, once again, 'so help me god.'