PRESS STATEMENT

NIGER DELTA MINISTRY SCANDAL: GROUP DEMANDS ADEQUATE PROTECTION FOR WHISTLEBLOWER

We the coalition of civil society organisations working on transparency, accountability and good governance in Nigeria have observed that the ongoing effort by the present administration at combating corruption in all ramifications may not yield the desired result, unless adequate protection is accorded whistleblowers.

It is on this note that we condemn in totality, the unwarranted threats against the Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Niger Delta, Fatima Bamidele for exposing corruption and mismanagement by the past administration, of the public treasury placed at the disposal of the Ministry.

We gathered that while briefing President Muhammadu Buhari at the Presidential Villa in July 2015, the permanent secretary had lamented lack of capital funding for the ministry since August 2014, owing to the slash of percentage of releases from the federal government coffers. This according to her has stalled a lot of our projects and resulted in accumulation of liabilities by the Ministry.

While we understand that passage of Whistle Blower Protection Bill passed by the Seventh National Assembly remains one of the tools that can be used to fight against corruption, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides for freedom of expression. This includes speaking out in a case of observed wrongful conducts and corrupt practices.

Whistleblowers are hitherto perceived as disloyal employees and troublemakers, who are out to unveil all manners of corruption practiced in secrecy. Reporting misconduct has caused some employees to be victimised by their employers as well as fellow employees, thus employees generally do not feel protected enough to come forward with information on misconducts and corrupt practices.

Apart from Bamidele, it would be recalled that in August, 2011, Dr. Ben Agada of National Women Development Centre, Abuja was unlawfully dismissed from service for exposing N300million meant for poverty alleviation programme allegedly embezzled by some top officers at the Centre. In November 2012, the Executive Director of Technical Services of the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), Dr. Bashir Gwandu was relieved of his position for uncovering alleged corruption in Commission.
Similarly, in 2014, the exposure of wastefulness and mismanagement in the Aviation sector by one Mr. Nicholas Edwards, a staff of the Ministry of Aviation has posed some threats against his job and life.

The intensity and implications of corrupt practices in the country has brought to the fore, importance of adequate protection for whistle-blowers. Though whistleblowing would have gone a long way at exposing all manner of corrupt practices in the nation’s socio-political and economic atmospheres; but the absence of enabling legislation backing whistle-blowing and protecting whistle-blowers restricts sincere effort at exposing corruption.

In the same vein, on Thursday 20th February, 2014, President Goodluck Jonathan suspended and later on relieved then Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi of his office on the grounds that he revealed unremitted $49.8 billion oil revenue and $20 billion kerosene subsidy to the Federation Account by NNPC. It was widely reported that action by the administration contravened section 11 of the Central Bank of Nigeria Act, 2007 which clearly laid down the instances when the Governor or any of his Deputies can cease to remain in office.

Unwarranted threat against, and unjustified removal of whistleblowers from office a serious factor perpetrating atrocious illegalities by some individuals, and cumulating in monumental fraud that backpedals socio-economic and political prosperity of the country. We have noticed persistent threat as a deliberate attempt to silence whistleblowers in the country.

There are several unreported cases of corruption worthy of exposure on daily basis; however, continuous victimizations, unjust treatments, fear of victimization, and lack of protection for whistleblowers have threatened effort by well-meaning persons, who would have volunteered to report various corrupt practices.

The resultant threats on well-being of person or persons that exposed high-level corruption and abuse of office in Nigeria have re-established the immediate need for effective legal framework for whistle-blowing and the protection of whistle-blowers in all facets of our national life.

We call on the President Muhammadu Buhari to bring to book all persons involved in looting of Niger Delta Ministry’s treasury, and consider prompt legislation of the Whistle Blower Protection Bill passed by the Seventh Assembly, to safeguard the lives of whistleblowers and complement the administration’s ongoing effort at combating corruption. Enabling legislation will motivate, encourage and assure whistleblowers that government and its agencies are willing and committed to fighting corruption and corrupt practices in its entire ramification.

We call on ICPC and EFCC to: strengthen whistleblowing mechanisms within public offices using Anti-corruption and Transparency Monitoring Units; institute an open-door policy that encourages employees to speak with their superiors and express their concerns; encourage
anonymous reporting to protect the whistleblower’s identity. The ultimate protection, in this regard lies with appropriate legislation in this regard and a vibrant judicial system.

We urge ICPC and EFCC to work closely with dedicated CSOs on anti-corruption to promote whistleblowing and provide dedicated hotline for reporting corruption cases. We encourage all government agencies on compliance with the provisions of Freedom of Information (FOI) Act to minimize corruption and secrecy that impair good governance, transparency and openness.

We further call on the media to never relent in their efforts at exposing corruption as part of their obligations; and all well-meaning Nigerians to show interest in and actively support the Whistle-blower Protection regime.

Signed:

*Transparency International (TI)*

*Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC)*

*Zero-Corruption Coalition (ZCC)*

*State of the Union (SOTU)*

*Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD)*

*Advocacy Nigeria*