

MESSAGE ON THE STATE OF THE NATION BY THE PRESIDENT
OF THE REPUBLIC,
NANA ADDO DANKWA AKUFO-ADDO,
ON THE OCCASION OF THE STATE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT,
ON THURSDAY, 21ST FEBRUARY, 2019, ACCRA.

Mr Speaker, I am glad to be here with you again in this august House, the Parliament of our Republic, to perform, for the third time, the pleasant duty of fulfilling my constitutional obligation, by giving Honourable Members and the Ghanaian people a message on the state of the nation.

In accordance with protocol and convention, it is good to see that First Lady Rebecca Akufo-Addo, Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, Second Lady Samira Bawumia, Spouse of Mr. Speaker, Mrs. Alberta Ocquaye, Chief Justice Sophia Akuffo, and Justices of the Supreme Court, Chairperson Nana Otuo Siriboe II, and Members of the Council of State, Chief of Defence Staff Lt. Gen O.B. Akwa, Inspector General of Police David Asante Apeatu, and Service Chiefs, are all present. Mr. Speaker, the House is duly honoured by the welcome attendance of the former Presidents of the Republic, their Excellencies Jerry John Rawlings and John Dramani Mahama, former First Lady, Her Excellency Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings, and the Dean and Members of the Diplomatic Corps.

The House should also take note of the passing last year of some distinguished citizens of our country – Vice President, Kwesi Bekoe Amissah Arthur; UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan; Senior Minister, J.H Mensah; Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice V.C.R.A.C Crabbe; PNDC Secretary, K.B Asante, and the Poet Laureate, Prof. Atukwei Okai. May their souls rest and abide in the bosom of the Almighty until the last day of the Resurrection when we shall all meet again. Amen!

Mr. Speaker, I hope the House will bear with me, as I have a lot to say, and I may take quite some time.

A month ago, almost to the day, I was in Yendi, fittingly attired as a self-proclaimed Prince of Dagbon, Prince Abudani, the first of that lineage, to witness the installation of Yaa-Na Mahama Abukari II as the overlord of Dagbon.

Thousands of our compatriots were there to share in the joy of the occasion. It was a ceremony that many had despaired we would ever see,

but a new Yaa-Na, accepted by the two gates of Abudu and Andani, was installed on that day.

It brought to an end decades of feuding that laid low the proud and ancient kingdom of Dagbon. It was a happy day, and it marked the climax of a long, tortuous journey, and a hard grind on the part of many people through the years.

Two years ago, when I had the honour to become President of our country, I decided to summon all the resources of the state and my own energies, and make a concerted effort through the dedicated, patriotic Committee of Eminent Chiefs that had been working on the problem for the past 17 years, to find an acceptable solution. With the blessings of the Almighty, we have had a breakthrough, and this led to the month-long series of events that climaxed in the installation on 25th January, 2019.

Mr Speaker, I was not looking to be accorded any special title or accolade, and I was certainly not looking for praise. I did want to do whatever I could to make sure that this long running sore, that was such a blight on Dagbon and Ghana, and which dragged down the development process in our country, could be resolved, and we could move on.

We had spent enough emotional stress, enough time, enough energy and enough money on the Dagbon dispute; I wanted that amount of emotion, that time, that energy and that money to be spent on making Dagbon and Ghana prosperous.

I am grateful for the hard work and wisdom of the eminent chiefs, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, Asantehene, the Nayiri, Naa Bohugu Abdulai Mahami Sheriga, Overlord of Mamprugu, and the Yagbonwura, Tuntumba Boresa Sulemana Jakpa, Overlord of the Gonja State, all of whom I salute, and for the support of many people in this House on both sides, and I pray that we all continue to build on this achievement and midwife the process until peace becomes part of the fabric of Dagbon.

The Minister for Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs intends to use the momentum of the Dagbon settlement to tackle the other protracted chieftaincy disputes in the country, hopefully, for resolution.

Mr. Speaker, in order to reinforce and support the process of reconciliation and the restoration of peace in Dagbon, I have decided that, this year, the official 62nd Independence Day celebration will be held in Tamale, on 6th March. This will be the first time in our nation's history that the

celebration is being held outside of our national capital of Accra. I am, very much, looking forward to it.

Mr Speaker, this past week, the grounds of Jubilee House, the seat of our nation's presidency, have resounded to a lot of celebrations, as we marked the handing over ceremonies of the constitutional instruments to the six new regions in our country. It has taken 18 months of very hard work and some complicated manoeuvring to get to where we are today.

Again, the requests and agitations for creation of new regions have been long-standing, and we have somehow never got around to dealing with them. The first petition for the creation of Oti region, for example, dates back to 1954. Mr Speaker, it was time to deal with these outstanding issues so that we could get ahead with the business of developing our country. The creation of the six new regions opens up the country and ensures that no one feels cut off from the centre.

Mr Speaker, no corner of this country is being left behind. It is for this reason that we have created the three development authorities. It is for this reason that we have re-aligned the national budget to ensure that every constituency gets the cedi equivalent of \$1 million a year for priority projects.

I am able to state, and every member of this House should be able to testify, that work is going on in each of the 275 constituencies around the country. The water and toilet provision segment of the Special Development Initiatives is taking place in every constituency. We came into office with a plan, Mr Speaker, and I am happy to say that we are working and delivering in accordance with that plan.

Mr Speaker, now that the regions are in place, we have the singular opportunity to avoid the old mistakes of urban planning that have made some of our towns and cities such unattractive places. The lessons would seem to show that the political capital does not necessarily have to be the site of all the institutions, and this would guide us in the setting up of the new regions. Indeed, when designating the capitals of the new regions, at the ceremonies at Jubilee House last week, I made it clear that Government is committed to the equitable distribution of government structures and institutions across the regions. We will keep to the commitment.

Mr. Speaker, we have also embarked on another aspect of our ambitious decentralisation programme, that is the exercise to expand full democracy to local government. In addition to the creation of thirty-eight (38)

Municipal and District Assemblies, and the elevation of twenty-nine (29) Districts to the status of Municipalities, the Bill for the amendment of article 55(3) of the Constitution has been gazetted, to pave way for the direct, popular election, on partisan basis, of Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executives (MMDCEs). It is expected that a Referendum will be held on the Bill, alongside the Unit Assembly and District level elections in 2019. I am calling, respectfully, for a repetition of the bi-partisan support, that made possible the hugely successful outcomes in the referenda for the new regions, to ensure the success of the impending referendum. Furthermore, a multidisciplinary panel of experts is being assembled to plan, cost, schedule and help implement a roadmap for the election of MMDCEs. We are committed to devolving more and more power to the Ghanaian people.

Mr Speaker, the economy is at the heart of all we seek to do, it is the success of the economy that will guarantee an improvement in the quality of the life of our people. I believe we are all now agreed that the fundamentals have to be sound if the economy is to flourish. We have just concluded a programme with the IMF, and, with continuing discipline, we shall sign off from the deal in April. This is the seventeenth time Ghana has had to go to the IMF in the sixty-two years of her independence.

Mr Speaker, we cannot make the progress we all desire unless we are consistent and disciplined in the management of our economy. The yo-yo nature of the boom and bust has not helped us achieve our goal of sustained prosperity, and lift us out of poverty. We have gone through another round of painful impositions to get to where we are today with healthy fundamentals.

Mr. Speaker, production in the economy, as measured by real GDP growth, has picked up very strongly in the last two years. From 3.4% in 2016, real GDP growth increased to 8.1% in 2017. In 2018, provisional data for the first three quarters indicate a strong real GDP growth of 6.0%, higher than the annual target of 5.6%. Real GDP growth for 2019 is forecast at 7.6%. Ghana's recent GDP growth has placed it amongst the highest in the world. The fiscal deficit is being brought down from the 7.3% of rebased GDP in 2016 to a provisional 3.9% of GDP at the end of 2018. The debt-to-GDP ratio has declined from the 56.6% of GDP in 2016 to 54.8% at the end of 2018.

Inflation has dropped from 15.4%, at the end of 2016, to 9% in January this year, the lowest in six years, as announced by the Ghana Statistical Service last week. Interest rates are declining, and so is the Bank of Ghana

Monetary Policy Rate. Our trade balance account, for the first time in more than a decade, recorded a surplus in 2017, and is expected to remain in surplus. In May 2018, a US\$2 billion Eurobond was issued for 30 and 10 years of US\$1 billion each with coupon rates of 8.627% and 7.625% respectively, and these were the lowest rate and the longest maturity in our history, signifying confidence in the economy. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, today, Ghana is the leading recipient of Foreign Direct Investment in West Africa.

Mr Speaker, these are good figures, and as we prepare to exit from the IMF programme in April, we expect the impressive figures and good performance to continue. We are very much aware that this is not the first time we have had such a good set of figures, but we are determined to do things differently this time around; we have imposed on ourselves fiscal discipline, we are paying off legacy debts and deepening good governance practices and business confidence is growing. We will maintain the discipline, and bring progress to our country.

We have decided to institute a legal framework to help with the discipline. We have passed the Fiscal Responsibility Law, Act 982, capping the deficit at 5% by law, and some two weeks ago, I inaugurated the Presidential Fiscal Responsibility Advisory Council, chaired by the eminent, respected economist, Dr. Paul Acquah, former Governor of the Bank of Ghana and former Deputy Director of the Africa Department of the IMF, with some of the finest and most reputable economists of our country as members. Its purpose is to advise the President on relevant, additional measures needed to maintain fiscal discipline.

We have done this because we know the temptation to go on a spending binge will always be there, we know election years will come around and there will be pressure on government to splurge, and persuasive arguments will be made that you have to stay in government to be able to implement your programmes. However, I am bent on running a responsible administration, mindful of the next generation, and not, merely, the next election.

In the meantime, our efforts are bearing some fruits, and the world has taken notice of the improvement in our economic fundamentals. In September last year, after almost a decade, we received our first Sovereign Credit rating upgrade from Standard and Poor's (S&P). This upgrade saw us move from B minus to B with a stable outlook. In December 2018, we also hosted the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, a visit that was historical

in every sense, as this was the first time that an IMF Managing Director had ever stepped foot on Ghanaian soil.

Mr Speaker, revenue mobilization poses the biggest challenge in the management of our economy, with the tax exemption policy in particular proving to be an achilles heel, and a growing menace to fiscal stability and revenue generation. In the last eight years, tax exemptions in respect of import duty, import VAT, import NHIL and domestic VAT have grown from three hundred and ninety-two million Ghana cedis (GH¢392 million), that is 0.6% of GDP in 2010, to GH¢4.66 billion, that is 1.6% of GDP in 2018.

These figures do not include exemptions from the payment of corporate and individual income taxes, concessions on tax rates, petroleum tax reliefs, customs tax exemptions enjoyed by diplomatic missions, and waiver of processing charges at the ports.

If we continue at this rate, in less than sixteen years, half of Ghana's revenue base will be given away as tax exemptions.

Mr. Speaker, this is not sustainable, and we intend to do something about it to reverse the trend, by introducing suitable measures that may disrupt the easy and comfortable arrangements that many have become accustomed to, but which we have to take to ensure that we have the firmest of foundations for the economic take-off that has escaped us for so long.

Mr. Speaker, workers in the public sector began the year on a good note, after receiving a 10% increase in their salaries, on top of the 11% increment of 2018. Forty-one thousand (41,000) workers in the informal sector were also enrolled onto Tier-3 pensions schemes, with pensioners seeing an average increment of 11% in their monthly pension incomes, with the lowest income bracket receiving a 14.7% increment. Last year, the Youth Employment Agency (YEA) engaged some one hundred and seven thousand (107,000) youth in various employment modules, with an additional one hundred and twenty-five thousand (125,000) set to be engaged this year.

Mr. Speaker, to consolidate further the relations between the social partners, in the post IMF era, Government will shortly sign a landmark social partnership agreement with Organised Labour/the Trades Union Congress, the Ghana Employers' Association and Government, represented by the Ministries of Finance and Employment and Labour

Relations, to provide a medium for building a sense of cohesion, trust, self-management, frank and open discussions to champion the course of development.

Mr. Speaker, the fight against child labour has chalked some modest success. Through the implementation of the second phase of the National Plan of Action (2017-2021), Ghana has been moved up from the Tier-2 Watch List position of the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report to Tier-2 in 2018.

Mr. Speaker, our ports remain important national assets. And we must manage them to improve trade and to the benefit of all Ghanaians. Government has introduced reforms at the port to improve efficiency. Among others, we introduced the paperless operations at the ports and goods can be cleared within 1 to 3 days. Going forward, we have set ourselves the goal of making our ports the most competitive in West Africa. In this regard, some further reforms would soon be announced by Government to enhance the competitive position of Ghana's ports.

Ghana may be the toast of the world because of its economy. We have all accepted that these economic fundamentals are the foundation upon which our people will become prosperous, but if they are uneducated or poorly educated, then prosperity will continue to elude them. Mr Speaker, a sudden injection of oil revenue or a rise or fall in the price of gold or cocoa can make a dramatic difference to your financial situation, but there are no shortcuts to having an educated and skilled workforce. We have no choice but to provide our young people with quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for every Ghanaian. It is the only way to ensure prosperity, and to protect our democracy. We are not sparing any efforts to make education in Ghana of the best quality, and fit for the needs of the 21st century.

In September 2019, a new standards-based curriculum will be rolled out from kindergarten to Class 6 in primary schools. This curriculum has drawn upon the best practices from all over the world, and will focus on making Ghanaian children confident, innovative, creative-thinking, digitally-literate, well-rounded, patriotic citizens. Mathematics, Science, Reading, Writing and Creativity are, therefore, at the heart of this new curriculum.

Mr Speaker, poverty should not be an excuse for any Ghanaian child not to reach their full potential. It, therefore, warms my heart that we are

now able to say that education in the public sector is free from Kindergarten to Senior High School, and, that this year, legislation would be passed to redefine basic education to include Senior High School.

Young people have to have options on which career path they choose, and I am glad to announce that all is set for the construction of 10 state-of-the-art Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) Centres this year. For far too long, we have preached about the importance of TVET without doing very much to demonstrate this importance. We send or urge young people to go to poorly equipped TVET centres, and we are surprised that they are not keen. The new TVET centres would be world class, and attractive to assure young people that they are not being sent to second best options.

We are also bent on demystifying science, mathematics and technology. Ten Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) centres are being built around the country to provide support for the introduction of STEM into basic education after the completion of a successful pilot phase. We can be sure, therefore, that Ghana's young people will be able to acquire skills that would put them at par with their peers anywhere in the world. The importance of science, technology and innovation has led me to appoint a Presidential Advisory Council on Science, Technology and Innovation (PACSTI) to advise the President on how to infuse the application of science and technology in the development of our nation, headed by a distinguished scientist, Prof. Edward Ayensu.

Mr Speaker, we shall bring before Parliament this year, a tertiary education policy Bill that will bring all the public universities under a common law, and make the administration of the public universities less cumbersome.

Mr. Speaker, a well-motivated and remunerated teacher is at the centre of our quality education and comprehensive teacher policy. This has started with the upgrading of the initial teacher education certificate to degree status, and the move to put the teaching profession up there with other professions in terms of respect and exclusivity. Currently, many of our teachers, who complete the three-year Diploma in Basic Education (DBE) at our Colleges of Education, go on, later, to do a two-year top-up first degree, by distance learning, at the University of Cape Coast. This means that, in addition to the extra amount of money spent on getting a degree, it will take them not less than five years to get one. With the introduction of the 4-year Bachelor of Education degree, teacher trainees

would now obtain their first degree at the end of their schooling. This ensures that they enter the teaching service as university graduates.

Mr. Speaker, when our children master the connection between science and their everyday lives, we would reach the stage in Ghana where we would be rid of the many diseases, borne of filth and poor hygiene, that are still part of our lives. In pursuing these goals, we need to remind ourselves repeatedly that health is wealth, and it is only a healthy population that can make Ghana prosperous.

In May 2018, Ghana won accolades at the World Health Assembly for having eradicated Trachoma, an eye disease that has plagued us for a long time. Today, our NHIS is buoyant. Government has paid up the GH¢1.2 billion arrears we inherited, and brought the operations of the NHIS back to life. On 19th December, 2018, the introduction of mobile renewal of membership was launched. Since then, there have been, on average, seventy thousand (70,000) members renewing their membership every week, by dialling ***929#** on any mobile phone network. Soon, in collaboration with the National Identification Authority, Ghanaians would be able to register, renew and access health care services using the Ghana Card. We have to thank Dr. Samuel Annor's brief, but productive stewardship as CEO of the National Health Insurance Authority for that. I wish him well in his retirement.

To deliver healthcare to Ghanaians more efficiently, in 2018, Government granted financial clearance for the recruitment of eleven thousand, one hundred and eighteen (11,018) health personnel to increase existing clinical staff. To augment the efforts of clinical staff, in September, 2018, the Ministry of Health received further financial clearance to employ fourteen thousand, five hundred and twenty-four (14,254) Nurse Assistants (Clinical and Preventive). These nurse assistants belong to the tranche that passed their exams in 2016 from Government Health Training Institutions, and have commenced work by 1st February, 2019. The Ministry of Health is working to obtain financial clearance for the recruitment of the 2017 and 2018 graduates.

The health delivery system will be significantly strengthened by the expected arrival in June of 275 ambulances, i.e. one per constituency, to make treatment of emergency cases more effective. Drone technology has also been introduced into that system to help deliver essential medicine, blood and blood products to remote communities.

We still face problems of inadequate infrastructure in our health establishments. We have problems of numerous structures at various stages of completion that cannot be finished and brought into use, because newer structures are being started, and there is no money to finish the ones started earlier. Mr Speaker, again, this is a long-standing problem that is a mark of our underdevelopment. We will not ignore or sweep the problem under the carpet. We are dealing with it, and will complete them.

Ghana's hardworking nurses and doctors would do their best, as they have always done, to make sure we get the best health care, but it behoves on each one of us to look after ourselves better. Apart from exercising and taking our regular health check-ups seriously, it is imperative that we eat healthy diets to prevent diseases that are caused by poor choices of nutrition.

Mr Speaker, when we are dealing with matters of good health, we must necessarily move on to shelter and housing. There is an acute shortage of user-friendly, decent housing for people in middle and low-income brackets in our country. This is a long-standing problem that gets worse with each passing day. It is time to tackle the issue and find a resolution. We are starting with the completion of the many abandoned projects dotted around the country. A consortium of local banks has raised 51 million dollars to fund the completion of the social housing units started by the Kufuor administration in 2006 at Koforidua, Tamale and Ho.

The Saglemi Housing Project, started under the last NDC government, is also high on our list of priorities this year. The five thousand (5,000) units it offers would boost our housing numbers. We are, therefore, establishing the value for money issues surrounding the project in order to reconcile the number of houses built with the schedule of payments made, and accelerate delivery.

The 2019 budget made provision for the construction of two hundred thousand (200,000) housing units, and a database of local and foreign developers has been created to help make this policy a reality. Land banks have also been secured in several towns across Ghana where factories, producing pre-fabricated building materials, can be sited for this huge construction effort. There are many well-intentioned projects that ended up pricing out the low-income earners, who were supposed to be their beneficiaries. We are determined to learn the lessons from past projects.

The Ministry of Finance is working to launch a one billion Ghana cedi housing fund that would target low-income earners.

Government will continue with the other housing projects for the police, armed forces and government workers across the country, through agencies like the State Housing Corporation.

The most exciting news on the housing landscape, though, is the drafting of plans to regenerate Nima, which holds the dubious title of being Accra's first slum. It has, of course, progressed very much since those early days, even if it has been unable to shake off the urban-slum title. I am a proud resident of Nima myself, and I am extremely excited that the regeneration plans will not dislodge or dispossess residents, but would rather transform Nima into a well-laid out residential area with full amenities. I am looking forward to it, good work that is being done by the Ministries of Inner City and Zongo Development and Works and Housing.

Another big problem is that of poor drainage in our towns and cities, which leads to flooding during the rainy season. Then, there is the serious problem of sea erosion along the coast that endangers the lives of our coastal people. It is time to deal with these long-term problems and find long-lasting solutions, and we are doing just that.

The Odawna Storm Drains in Accra, which have caused many tragedies over the years, are now being reengineered by a team of experts who will give it a permanent fix. The Dichemso Drainage System is also on our list of priorities, and a bid has been put out for experts to transform it into a more efficient system.

Our ongoing coastal protection projects are proceeding in Adjoa in the Western Region, Blekusu, New Takoradi phase II (Elmina), Dansoman, Axim and Dixcove. This year, we will also begin others in Amanful Kumah, Dansoman phase II, Komenda, Anomabo, Cape Coast, Mensah Guinea, Ningo Prampram, New Takoradi Phase III, Apam, Kokrobite, Bortianor, Blekusu Phase II and Aboadze-Shama Phase II, Maritime University, Nungua, Takoradi, Anyanui and Essipong.

Mr. Speaker, we are putting in place plans to avert the perennial flooding caused by the spillage of the Bagre dam, which has resulted in the constant loss of lives and property over the years. In the short-term, desilting of the White Volta will be undertaken this year, in conjunction with discussions with the Burkinabes to regulate the flow of the spillage, and mitigate its impact. The Ministry of Works and Housing will, in the coming week, receive a report on a feasibility study conducted by the

Chinese company, SinoHydro, for the construction of a dam at Pwalugu, to serve as a receptacle to hold the volume of water spilled from the Bagre Dam for irrigation purposes, and also for the generation of electricity. This will be the permanent solution to the Bagre Dam problem. The requisite approvals will be sought by the Ministry from Cabinet and Parliament to permit the construction of the Pwalugu Dam.

Mr. Speaker, if there has been any Government that has been on the side of Persons with Disabilities, it is my Government. We have increased the share of the District Assemblies Common Fund to Persons with Disabilities from 2% to 3%, and we have also ensured the implementation of our pledge of employing 50% of the persons who manage the country's toll booths from amongst Persons with Disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, we are continuing with initiatives to improve the Creative Arts Sector. We have also worked to finalise the Creative Arts Bill, leading to the setting up of the Creative Arts Fund. For the first time, in 2018, Government provided support to the Creative Arts Council, and the Creative Arts Masterclass, to build capacity of Creative Arts practitioners, has also commenced. The Eastern Regional Theatre has been completed, and work is currently ongoing towards the construction of the Kumasi theatre.

Mr Speaker, considering how often Ghana is in the news usually for good reasons, we have not been able to attract as many visitors to our country as we should. We are making a special effort from now onwards to attract tourists into our country. Under the See Ghana, Eat Ghana, Wear Ghana and Feel Ghana campaign, the Ghana Tourism Authority recorded a 20% growth since its launch to over six hundred thousand visitations to various tourist sites. The World Bank has approved a US\$40 million grant to support the Tourism Ministry and its agencies to help upgrade tourist facilities.

In September 2018, in Washington D.C., in front of the Congressional Black Caucus of the United States Congress, I proclaimed 2019 as the "Year of Return", commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first 20 West African slaves in the Commonwealth of Virginia, in what was to become the United States of America. We intend to use the symbolism of this "Year of Return" to bring together Africans, persons of African descent, and all well-wishers and lovers of freedom to strengthen the commitment to ensuring that the blots on our history, i.e. the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery, never reoccur. In response to this proclamation, some seventy (70) African-American Hollywood celebrities

visited Ghana in December 2018. The year-long campaign, being coordinated by the Ghana Tourism Authority, is expected to increase arrivals considerably.

Training across the entire tourism sector is also receiving priority. The Hospitality Training Institute has been renovated, and re-opened in July 2018 to provide needed training in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Under a Tourism Attractions Upgrade Project, several tourist sites, including Elmina Heritage Bay, Axim Fort St. Antonio, Assin Manso Slave River, Tetteh Quarshie Cocoa Farm, Bunso Arboretum, Kintampo Water Falls, are undergoing upgrades. A draft Legislative Instrument (LI) on Sites and Attractions is currently undergoing final stakeholder consultations. This will ensure world-class standards are set and maintained at all our tourism sites and attractions.

Mr. Speaker, the greatest attraction of our country is its people. Yes, we have castles and forts, we have water falls and dramatic mountain ranges, we have breath-taking beaches, and historical sites that reduce visitors to strong emotions, but it is the people of Ghana and our welcoming attitude that are the strongest attraction to visitors. We should never forget that we all have a responsibility to make visitors to our country feel welcome. In this “Year of Return”, when we have invited the world to visit, I would urge each one of us to make a special effort to make a visit to our country a memorable one. Our music, our foods, our clothes and the quintessential akwaaba smile will make a visitor to our country come back again and again.

Mr Speaker, but there are things that many of us do that would put off any visitor from visiting our country, no matter how attractive the geography or the history might be. I refer, especially, to some of our sanitation habits.

Mr Speaker, public resources must be channelled into ventures that generate wealth, and not spent on avoidable expenditures. The cost of clearing and cleaning up our cities and towns after those who litter has become prohibitive. The littering habit seems to be more predominant in the cities and urban areas, and, mercifully, largely absent in the villages.

Last year, I reiterated before you my pledge of improving sanitation in the country, and making Accra the cleanest city in Africa, by the end of my term. There has been a significant improvement in sanitation, even though, I acknowledge, more can be done. However, this is currently the state of play. We have witnessed an increase in the coverage of solid

waste management, from 16.6% to 53%, and, over the course of last year, thirty-five thousand, eight hundred and sixty-two (35,862) household toilets were built, as opposed to one thousand, six hundred and ninety-eight (1,698) in 2016. We will intensify efforts at making Accra a clean city.

In 2019, apart from continuing with educating and sensitizing people, we intend to use the bye-laws to enforce cleanliness. The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Sanitation are working together to try sanitation offences. Persons who litter would be tried and punished, and so would those who steal litter bins from our streets.

We are launching a National Sanitation Brigade to help us carry this out, and, through this vehicle, we will not only keep our towns and cities clean, but will also provide jobs for our young people. Once waste is properly and efficiently managed, we then can explore how to use the waste collected to advance the economy of our nation.

A cursory look around our cities and towns would show us that plastic filth is our biggest problem. We intend to solve this problem through the internationally recognized priorities of waste: **reduction** first, followed by **reuse, recycle, recovery** and, lastly, **disposal**, which is to be avoided whenever possible.

Government has prepared a Plastics Management Policy, with the overarching aim of meeting the challenges of comprehensive plastics management. About 82% of Ghana's plastics waste could be readily recovered and recycled with existing technologies into value-addition products in high demand locally and within the West African region.

A vibrant recycling industry in Ghana could recover nearly one million tonnes of waste plastics from the environment and landfills annually, to be recycled into basic-need products valued at GH¢2 billion per year, creating many jobs across the economy. Currently, extensive discussions are being concluded with investors on the most sustainable options available to rid Ghana of this plastic filth menace.

Mr Speaker, we are also tackling the problem of electronic waste head on. On August 20, 2018, I launched the National E-waste Program to mark the commencement of two key provisions of the Hazardous and Electronic Waste Control and Management Act, Act 917.

These provisions empower the External Service Provider (SGS) to verify, assess and collect the advance recycle eco fee on all electrical and electronic equipment from all exporting countries, and also to establish a state-of-the-art recycling facility at Agbogbloshie, whose construction will begin in April. Not only would we solve the problem of waste disposal in an environmentally-friendly manner, setting up the recycling facility will lead to the creation of over twenty thousand (20,000) direct jobs, through the establishment of associated holding centres in each regional capital and collection centres in each district.

Mr Speaker, it is unfortunate that, in 2019, we still have to revisit this topic, but, open defecation cannot be a characteristic of a country that is working to be transformed economically, and to be counted amongst the developed nations of the world. That is why it is absolutely imperative that we make a success of our One House-One-Toilet Policy.

The Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) Programme is being implemented in over four thousand, five hundred (4,500) communities in one hundred and thirty (130) districts to achieve Open Defecation Free (ODF) Communities.

Mr. Speaker, affordable and reliable energy is absolutely critical to realising our vision of economic transformation. I am happy to announce that gas production tripled during the year, from 100 to 300 million cubic feet per day. The Ministry of Energy is undertaking steps to remove the transmission bottlenecks, to ensure that Ghanaian gas can reach power plants located in the eastern part of the country, and I am confident that, by August this year, the situation would have been fully remedied to ensure Ghana uses locally produced gas for the bulk of its thermal power generation, saving substantial amounts of foreign exchange on imported fuels.

Government is committed to achieving an electricity generation mix that ensures diversity and security of energy supply. For this reason, we will continue to promote the deployment of renewable energy in line with our policy target of 10% renewables in the energy mix from the current 1%.

Another justification for renewable energy is that, in spite of Ghana's excess electricity generation capacity, we can still not achieve our universal access target because there are many Ghanaian communities, especially those on islands and lake sides, that cannot be reached through the national grid. For example, there are currently two hundred (200)

island and two thousand (2,000) lake side communities that require mini-grids from renewable sources to meet their energy needs.

To reduce government's expenditure on utilities, and also promote the use of solar power for government and public buildings, the Ministry of Energy initiated the Solar Rooftop Programme. The Ministry is leading by example with the installation of a 65-kilowatt solar rooftop system at its premises.

Jubilee House will also be powered, as from August this year, by solar energy, as an example to other public institutions. In fact, government's target is to install up to 200 megawatts of distributed solar power by 2030 in both residential and non-residential facilities in order to reduce Government's liabilities to ECG (PDS Ghana Ltd).

Renewable energy has also become a necessary addition to our energy sector because it has increasingly become cheaper, and is key to the implementation of our international obligations under Sustainable Development Goal 7, on access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy, as well as Sustainable Development Goal 13, on urgent action to combat climate change.

There has been good news with the recent announcement by Aker Energy of one of the biggest oil finds in Africa. Mr Speaker, this has led me to think that an NPP government must be good for Ghana. After many, many years of our looking and almost giving up, it took an NPP government to discover oil in 2007. In eight years of NDC administration, 13 oil block deals were signed, and not a single one was developed. The first one signed in 2017, under my government, which was Aker, has led to the second biggest oil discovery in Africa. Enough to make a believer of anyone, I might say.

Mr Speaker, there is no avoiding the fact that the oil industry, unfortunately, has a reputation for corruption. Since the discovery of oil in our country, there has been heightened anxiety among the people that we do not fall into the same trap of the oil money benefitting individual officials to the detriment of the state and the general public.

On the fight against corruption in the oil industry, and to aid transparency, we have established a National Register of Contracts on which all the Petroleum Agreements signed by the Government have been published. This provides a platform for citizens to scrutinize the oil contracts signed by government, and accords with the international call for contract transparency.

We have also passed the General Petroleum Regulations, which provide for the disclosure of beneficial ownership information of companies operating in Ghana's oil and gas industry. This will ensure that people do not hide in the shadows to appropriate oil blocks to themselves, at the expense of the citizens of Ghana. The interest of major oil companies in Ghana has become dramatic. Today, oil companies such as the American giant, ExxonMobil, and the Norwegian conglomerate, Aker, have signed petroleum exploration agreements with Ghana. Through the launch of the "GHANA OIL AND GAS LICENSING ROUNDS 2018", the bidding process for the allocation of new petroleum rights to prospective investors, the first such exercise in our history, other global players such as BP, China National Offshore Oil Corporation, and Total have expressed interest in coming to Ghana.

Mr Speaker, be it in the oil industry or manufacturing or retail, every day demonstrates the urgent need for our own businesses to develop and flourish. We have put in place the mechanisms to train young entrepreneurs and to help established businesses with a stimulus package to expand their companies.

Under the Presidential Support programme, one thousand, three hundred and fifty (1,350) start-ups and small businesses have benefitted from a special government business support programme. Beneficiaries received between ten thousand (GH¢10,000) and one hundred thousand Ghana cedis (GH¢100,000) each, at a special interest rate of 10%, instead of the average prevailing market rate of 26%.

This is designed to help grow and expand their businesses, and will create about thirty thousand (30,000) direct jobs. Eighteen thousand (18,000) jobs have already been created under this programme. This is the first time in Ghana's history that there has been a deliberate, systematic and coherent national support for start-ups and small businesses.

Businesses, which benefitted, included agribusiness and agro-processing, information communication and technology, tourism and recreation, sanitation and waste management, health, food and beverages, green and ecological businesses, sports and real estate

Already established businesses are also receiving help, with an amount of two hundred and thirty million Ghana cedis (GH¢230 million) being disbursed among sixteen (16) companies under the stimulus package. This has led to the creation of eight thousand, five hundred (8,500) to ten thousand (10,000) direct and indirect jobs.

Proof, if some were needed that we are getting something right, and generating the right atmosphere to attract foreign business, has come with the announcement that three major international automobile manufacturers, Volkswagen, Nissan and Sinotruck have signed MOUs to establish assembling plants in our country. Renault is also conducting feasibility studies on establishing an assembly plant in Ghana, as is Toyota. We will outdoor, in March, the National Automotive Policy spelling out the terms, conditions and incentive package for participating in Ghana's new automobile industry, which will also apply to indigenous car assembly companies.

Mr Speaker, our local textile industry has been struggling for years, and many textile companies have, indeed, gone under. We have decided to give it a major stimulus to help put it on a strong footing. The local textile industry has, therefore, been granted a zero-rated VAT on the supply of locally-made textiles for a period of three years. We have put in place a tax stamp regime for both locally manufactured and imported textiles to address the challenge of pirated designs and logos in the textile trade. The Tema Port has been designated as a Single-Entry Corridor for the importation of textile prints, with a textile taskforce in place to ensure effective compliance, and reduce, if not eliminate, smuggling of imported textiles. A new textile import management system has been instituted, also, to control imports of textiles.

Mr. Speaker, the "One-District-One-Factory" policy has taken off, and 79 factories under the scheme are at various stages of operation or construction. Another 35 are going through credit appraisal. All told, there is a lot of activity going on under the scheme, and it has awoken the interest of young people to go into manufacturing business. Under the Rural Enterprises Programme, funded by the African Development Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, 50 small-scale processing factories will be established by the end of the year in 50 districts across the country, particularly in areas where there is evidence of significant post-harvest losses. These will be owned and managed by organized youth groups, with technical support from the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Mr Speaker, small and medium scale enterprises form the base of businesses in our country, and financing has been the bane of their operations. MASLOC was established in 2006 to meet a critical need by providing the type of small-scale loans needed by these small-scale enterprises at reasonable rates. Sadly, MASLOC was undermined by base

political considerations and endemic corruption, and the centre was almost run down completely.

I am glad to report that MASLOC has been revamped, and is getting back to do what it was set up to do. There has been strict adherence to credit procedures and prudent management of the credit recovery process. These have resulted in a recovery rate of 89% of loans administered under a pilot scheme introduced in 2017.

MASLOC was given an amount of thirty-five million Ghana cedis (GH¢35 million) in October 2018 for disbursement. This is the first time an amount of such magnitude has been given to the Centre outside of an election year. Of the thirty-five million Ghana cedis that were received, the Centre has disbursed twenty million, five hundred and sixty-three thousand, one hundred Ghana cedis (GH¢20,563,100), with fourteen million, three hundred and seventeen thousand, two hundred Ghana cedis (GH¢14,317,200) to be disbursed for pending applications, which have been approved. So far, 87% of the monies disbursed have gone to women, i.e. to twenty-four thousand, five hundred and eighty-two (24,582) women. The 2016 NPP Manifesto promised to allocate 50% of MASLOC funds to women, and we have surpassed this promise.

It has obviously been noticed that interesting things are happening at the successfully restructured MASLOC, and that is why the Centre was allocated an amount of two hundred million Ghana cedis (GH¢ 200 million) in the 2019 budget. Such an amount is unprecedented in the history of MASLOC. In 2019, MASLOC will give increased attention to youth start-up businesses in vegetable farming, poultry, piggery and fish farming.

Mr Speaker, the incidence of bad governance methods that almost collapsed MASLOC has, unfortunately, affected the running of many businesses generally and the financial sector in particular. The banking sector has gone through what can only be described as a traumatic upheaval.

Again, Mr Speaker the woes of the banking sector have also been a case of long-standing bad practices that we, previously, had been unable or unwilling to deal with, which we are now having to deal with in the most painful manner. The clean-up has cost the national treasury GH¢12.7 billion, money we can ill afford, but which was necessary to sanitise the sector, minimise job losses, and protect deposits of one million, one hundred and forty-seven thousand, three hundred and sixty-six (1,147,366) Ghanaians and their businesses and the people they

employed. The banking sector has emerged stronger from these developments, and inspired confidence in it. In all this, I have been anxious that our local banks are helped and given as much support as possible, which has been done, but I will not be on the side of criminal behaviour if that is discovered. I would urge that we are all patient for the investigations to be made in a calm manner.

And, while I am on the subject of rogue activities in the banking sector, it is probably the time to mention the MenzGold debacle. This is a tragic phenomenon that appears to have occurred in plain sight, and affected a lot of people, in spite of warnings from official institutions. As the authorities try to unravel the intricacies of what happened, I admonish all Ghanaians to learn the necessary lessons for the future, even as State institutions work to bring a resolution to the matter, and those who are seen to have indulged in criminal activities, are brought to justice. Last week, I inaugurated the Presidential Financial Stability Advisory Council, an inter-institutional consultative coordination body, which groups together all the regulators of our financial system, and whose purpose is to advise the President on the measures to be taken to preserve the stability of the financial system. The existence of such a body would have forestalled the emergence of the Menzgold saga, and will make it difficult, in future, for any such scheme to get off the ground.

Mr Speaker, during times like these of banking and business upheavals, agriculture appears even more attractive. It is more predictable and the soil and plants and animals far more reliable than sharp figures. The past two years have shown that, when a government takes deliberate measures to support agriculture, it pays healthy dividends.

There has been food and for the first time in a long while, we had more than we needed. It was not that long ago that Ghana was in the humiliating position of having to import maize from her landlocked Sahelian neighbours and plantain from Cote d'Ivoire. Thanks to the programme for "Planting for Food and Jobs", admirably organised by that outstanding Minister for Agriculture, Dr. Owusu Afriyie Akoto, this House stands informed, that, in 2018, exports of food crops such as cassava, rice, yellow and white maize, soya, plantain, cowpea and yam were made **FROM** Ghana to Burkina Faso, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire in considerable quantities. We had a bumper harvest of produce, and, last year, we did not import a single grain of maize.

Based on the successes chalked in 2017 and then in 2018, the Ministry took giant strides to scale up the Planting for Food and Jobs Campaign in

2019, and to introduce new modules of the programme. Four of such new modules are the Greenhouse Villages programme, the Planting for Export and Rural Development (PERD) programme, the Rearing for Food and Jobs (RFJ) campaign and Mechanisation Centers programme.

We are hoping that the success will lead to a fundamental change in attitudes towards farming practices, and the sector will be truly transformed. Bumper harvests and increased food production in general would be the norm, and not a surprise once in a while. Extension services will be expanded, and our farmers will have the confidence to know that theirs is a worthwhile business from which they can and will get healthy remuneration and respect.

Mr Speaker, this year the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development plans to implement a flagship programme - "***Aquaculture for Food and Jobs***" (AFJ) – complementary to the "Planting for Food and Jobs" initiative – to reinvigorate and boost the aquaculture industry. Priority will be given to youth entrepreneurs, distressed farmers, second cycle and public institutions to set up and operate fish farms across the country.

The programme will offer participating individuals and groups the requisite inputs, such as cages, fingerlings, fish feed and training, to be able to establish their own farms. The **AFJ** will be implemented for three years, from 2019 to 2021, in collaboration with the Nation Builders Corps (NABCO) and the School Feeding Programme. It is expected to create seven thousand (7,000) jobs, and add an extra thirty-three thousand, six hundred and twenty-eight (33,628) metric tonnes of fish to our domestic fish production. Piloting of the AFJ has already started at the James Camp Prison.

For traditional fishing, Government will collaborate with the private sector to facilitate the provision of five thousand (5,000) outboard motors and fifty-five thousand, two hundred and fifty (55,250) bales of prescribed fishing gears through the fisheries associations. To promote the effective and efficient distribution of premix fuel, we will continue to use the premix fuel tracking system, and audit landing beaches, measures which have ensured that, since November 2018, there has been no report of premix diversion, a marked improvement from the past.

To modernize the fisheries sector, US\$185 million of loan money has been earmarked for the construction of twelve (12) landing sites and two (2) fishing harbours in some selected fishing communities in the

country. Phase I will kick off in March at Axim, Mumford, Winneba and Teshie. Recently, I cut the sod to commence work at the Jamestown Harbour Complex, which, like the development of Elmina Fishing Harbour, is part of our plans for the fishing sector in 2019.

Mr Speaker, as is well known, our lands and water bodies have been under extreme pressure for some time. Farming lands have been destroyed, and rivers that used to provide safe drinking water and fish turned into toxic water bodies.

This is why we placed the ban on all small-scale mining, so we could find ways to deal with the illegal mining, or galamsey, as it is popularly called. The ban on small scale mining has now been lifted, but not on galamsey. Some of our water bodies have shown remarkable signs of rejuvenation. River Ankobra, for example, looks restored to life; indeed, some fish have even been seen in the Ankobra for the first time in a long while. But the battle against galamsey is nowhere near being won yet, and I appeal to all citizens to be part of the battle to keep our lands and water bodies safe.

As I have said on several occasions, this government cannot be against mining. It bears repeating that, with the Almighty having blessed our land with so many precious minerals, mining, inevitably, will be part of our lives. That is why I had the pleasure of reopening the AngloGold Obuasi Mine, on 22nd January, 2019, which had remained effectively closed since 2014, in fulfilment of a campaign pledge I made to the people of Obuasi on 15th July, 2016. In order to help AngloGold Ashanti secure the needed investment for this project, Government provided a number of fiscal incentives, and guaranteed the stability of the project against changes in the legal environment, especially in the early years of the mine's operations. The fiscal arrangements made this time has provided a more equitable balance between the interests of Government and the investors. With an estimated two thousand, five hundred (2,500) jobs to be created, Obuasi is being brought back to life again, and, this time around, under the new management of AngloGold Ashanti, the development of Obuasi will reflect the wealth its soil produces, like its counterparts in other mining cities around the world.

Mr. Speaker, we intend, also, to mine, at long last, our bauxite deposits in order to establish an integrated aluminium industry in Ghana. The Ghana Integrated Aluminium Development Corporation, a statutory corporation, has been set up, with the support of Parliament, to spearhead Government's commitment to create an integrated aluminium industry.

Since its formation, the leadership of the corporation has been working tirelessly with transaction advisors and other stakeholders to ensure the objective of achieving an integrated aluminium industry is executed in a timely manner. A request for proposal is ready to be sent out to the market by the end of this month. This request will solicit proposals from investors interested in partnering government to develop various components of the integrated aluminium industry in Ghana.

Taking cognisance of the fact that achieving an integrated aluminium industry agenda requires the uninterrupted and competitive supply of power to the industry, Government is in the process of negotiating special arrangements to supply power at internationally competitive rates. This arrangement is expected to be approved by Cabinet and, subsequently, hopefully, by Parliament soon.

The same model is being pursued for the exploitation of our iron ore deposits, which, together with our considerable manganese deposits, can enable us found a steel industry to serve our country and the region.

A data centre, the first of its kind, now exists at the Minerals Commission, which will allow prospective investors and partners to access every information regarding the bauxite deposits and the aluminium industry. The Minerals Commission is in the course of creating an equivalent data centre for our iron ore deposits.

Mr Speaker, the security services are at the forefront of keeping us and our nation safe. Let me pay homage to the men and women of the services for the sterling work that they do. The Ghana Armed Forces, in collaboration with other security agencies, have been in Operations CALM LIFE, COWLEG, HALT, CONQUERED, FIST, GONGON, CITADEL, AHODWO and VANGUARD. Ayekoo to you men and women of the Armed Forces. Ghana is proud of you. Your hard work is contributing to making our nation a safe place.

I would like to mention the improvements that have been registered in dealing with nomadic herdsmen. The Ghana Armed Forces assisted the National Security to embark on OPERATION ROADSTAR, and as a result a 40-acre cattle ranch has been constructed to accommodate over six thousand (6,000) cattle at Wawase, in Afram Plains, and reducing, considerably, the tensions in the area with the nomadic herdsmen. There are plans to replicate these ranches in other parts of the country.

Government is pleased to have fulfilled its promise to the Military Personnel by increasing the United Nations Peacekeeping Troops

contribution allowances from Thirty United State Dollars (USD 30.00) to Thirty-Five United State Dollars (USD35.00) per soldier per day. And as promised, we will continue to pay the troops regularly at the operational areas.

We will continue to modernize and provide the equipment needed by the Military to help them carry out their mandate effectively. Tomorrow, I will be presenting to the Ghana Armed Forces 50 ANKAI Buses, the first tranche of the 138 Staff and Operational Vehicles of various categories, and 26 dispatch motorcycles. This year, we will provide the Army with 30 Otokar Armored Personnel Carriers (APC), and 6 Fast Patrol Boats for the Navy.

We will also provide improved training facilities by transforming the Military Academy into a World Class Institution, and expand the housing project from six 16 flats to 44, and begin constructing 160 2-bedroom apartments across the country. This year, we will also complete and commission the 500-bed Military Hospital in the Ashanti Region, and begin the third phase of this project.

Mr. Speaker, the amendment of LI 1332, which is seeking to change the length of service of the men and women of the other ranks of the Ghana Armed Forces from 25 to 30 years and the associated career progression plan, has been reviewed, laid and passed by Parliament, and will be implemented this year as planned.

Mr Speaker, it is the police that we the ordinary citizens have to deal with in our everyday lives. It is, therefore, not surprising that, often, the police come in for a lot of criticism from the people.

Mr Speaker, as is the case with many of our institutions, things had deteriorated for a long time, and we had come to accept the abnormal as normal. We have been busy this past year supplying the police with equipment, cars, motorbikes, drones and other vital policing equipment. Financial clearance has been given, and they are in the process of recruiting up to four thousand (4,000) men and women into the service. That is a first, gradually we are increasing the police numbers, and the service too is waking up to its responsibilities and offering more training to their officers. I look forward to a better trained, better equipped and happier police service that has the respect and cooperation of the people.

Mr Speaker, we need this well-trained police service if we are to abide by the rule of law. I am aware of the frustration of many at the delays in the

justice delivery system, which are the result of a multiplicity of factors, which we are trying to address.

And this must be the appropriate time and place to mention the abysmal state of the lower courts around our country. Many people must have seen on television the barely concealed outrage of the Chief Justice, as she has been going around examining the courts. It is obvious that most of the lower courts are not fit for purpose, and we must provide suitable structures for our law courts. Discussions on how to raise the money are currently ongoing, and I am optimistic that a solution will be found.

Mr Speaker, I am pleased to note that there appears to have been a marked change in the Ministry of Justice. No longer do we have people bringing frivolous claims against the State because they know the case will not be defended, and they will get judgement debts. I believe the word is now out that every claim against the government will be vigorously defended, and the State will no longer be the soft touch it used to be for people to get suspiciously large judgement debts awarded to them.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy to state that, as you know, Parliament has virtually completed its deliberations on the Right To Information Bill, and that, any moment from now, the nation will hear the news of its long, anticipated passage. I will, happily, assent to it as soon as it is brought to my table.

Mr Speaker, we all await the Special Prosecutor to start his work. It is in everybody's interest that we know that any accusations of corruption in public office will be vigorously investigated and prosecuted, if the prima facie evidence is there. This should be an essential feature of the governance culture of our country. For myself, I know the Special Prosecutor to be a responsible public official, who will act when he is ready.

Mr Speaker, Ghana remains an active player in international affairs, especially in the region of West Africa and on the continent of Africa. Ghana's voice is loud and clear on issues at international fora. Good neighbourliness underpins our foreign policy and we try to be at peace with all. I have been intimately involved in trying to find a resolution to the difficulties in Togo, and we hope that they are coming to an end.

Mr Speaker, communications inside and with the outside are critical for the modern existence of any nation. Our roads, inside the country and

those leading out to our neighbouring countries, have been in a dreadful state for a long time. Everybody has by now heard about the arrangements we have made with the Chinese company, SinoHydro, and it is a matter of great relief to me that I am able to say that work will now be starting on the roads that have been designated to be part of that project. It is worth stating that we are very much aware that there are many more roads that do not come under the SinoHydro deal, which are also in a bad way and we continue to seek ways to build a road network worthy of our nation.

I am glad to be able to report that the Accra to Tema railway service has started running on the refurbished line. The opening of the Accra/Nsawam line has been postponed, because sand winners have undermined the ground underneath the track near Pokuase. It is now being repaired, and the service will start hopefully by the end of February.

If we want the railways to work, we would all have to take an interest in and stop the activities of encroachers on the railway lands. The rehabilitation of the narrow-gauge line will continue from Nsawam to Koforidua. Work is continuing on the rehabilitation of the Kojokrom to Tarkwa section of the Western line, whilst work on the standard gauge section from Kojokrom to Manso is ongoing.

Apart from all the investment being made, the government is committing an extra one billion US dollars to the development of the new railway network. Five hundred million dollars (\$500 million) will be applied to the development of the Western line, and five hundred million dollars (\$500 million) will be applied to the first phase of the Kumasi to Paga section of the national network.

The development of the Tema/Ouagadougou railway line is also progressing steadily. Twelve shortlisted companies have been invited to proceed to the next stage of the procurement process. This year, land acquisition will commence beyond the Volta River at Mpakadan, and the strategic investor will be selected.

To sum it up, the railways are coming in a big way into Ghana, and we shall open up our country for the development that we all desire.

Mr. Speaker, Government recognizes the significance of aviation to our country's economic and social development. Operations at the Kumasi, Tamale, Takoradi airports have been revamped, with the resurgence in domestic airline operations through the introduction of new domestic operators like Unity Air and Passion Air. Soon, the flag of Ghana will be

flown again, as we have identified strategic investors to launch a Home-Based Carrier.

Whilst we embark on the protracted process of building roads and railways to open up our country, we are doing so with modern technology. Mobile telephony has almost covered the entire country, and broadband internet connectivity is available in many places.

There are one million, two hundred (1,200,000) registered and verified addresses through the National Digital Property Addressing System; in other words, we have joined the modern world, and gradually leaving the right turn at the blue kiosk, and opposite the Kofi-broke-man seller, behind us.

People are able to renew their National Health Insurance cards in minutes in the comfort of their own homes. You can now renew your driving licence, and register a car in half an hour, register your business online, and acquire a passport in a week without any of the difficulties that used to come with trying to get any of these things done. The National Identification card, the Ghana Card, has been issued to people in government departments and members of the security services, and, this year, the rest of the population will be registered and receive their cards. We are determined to join the digital world.

Mr Speaker, Ghana won, last year, the bid to host the 13th All Africa Games. It presents our nation with the opportunity to upgrade sporting infrastructure in the country, and position our nation as a preferred destination for the development of sporting disciplines on the continent. We have begun renovating and upgrading our sporting infrastructure such as the Accra and Cape Coast Sports Stadia, and the Azumah Nelson Sports Complex in Kaneshie, and a complete refurbishment of sports facilities across the country. Funds have also been released for the completion of the University of Ghana Sports Stadium, started by the Kufuor-led NPP Government, but abandoned soon after 2009. The Ghanaian people are also expectant of a return to normalcy of all football-related activities as soon as possible, and the Normalization Committee is working to ensure that they meet the March deadline.

Mr Speaker, three months ago, a member of this honourable House and the representative of Ayawaso West Wuogon constituency, died suddenly, throwing all of us into mourning. On 31st January, three weeks ago exactly, a by-election was called to elect a replacement for the late Emmanuel Kyeremanteng Agyarko. May his soul rest in perfect peace.

During the course of that morning, some events took place in that constituency, which led to an uproar in the country. My first instinct was to let the police do their investigations, and then prosecute, if they found evidence of criminality. The narration that this was another incident of "normal by-election violence" caused me to expand my response.

Indeed, Mr Speaker, recent by-elections in Akwatia, Atiwa, Chereponi, Talensi and Amenfi West had been marked with violence, and some people still have their physical and emotional scars to show for it.

I could have sat it out, as some did, for Akwatia, Atiwa, Chereponi, Talensi and Amenfi West, but I decided that that would not be in the interest of Ghanaian democracy. The time has come to put an end to the phenomenon of politically-related violence. The only way in our system to begin to deal with such a situation is through the work of a Commission of Inquiry. Thankfully, I got four responsible Ghanaians of independent spirit, who agreed to serve on the Commission. I hope the findings and recommendations of the Emile Short Commission will enable us chart a path to ending politically-related violence in our country.

The events of last Monday, in Kumasi, where a meeting of the national and regional executives of the opposition National Democratic Congress was broken up by acts of violence, leading to the tragic death of a citizen, have reinforced the urgent need for us to find that path. I want to use the platform of this Message to make a sincere, passionate appeal to the leaders of the two main political parties in our country, NPP and NDC, to come together, as soon as possible, preferably next week, to agree on appropriate measures to bring an end to this worrying and unacceptable phenomenon of vigilantism in our body politic. I have asked the leadership of the NPP to extend an invitation to the leadership of the NDC for such a meeting. The security services of the country will be on standby to assist this meeting. If voluntary disbandment by the parties is not feasible, then I will initiate legislation on the matter. Vigorous debate and the exchange of ideas should be the true basis of political dialogue and competition in our country, not the activities of party vigilante groups.

Mr. Speaker, what was tolerated over the years cannot and must not be accepted anymore. We must not take our peace and security for granted-- not for a moment. Our children and grandchildren will not forgive us if we were to compromise our peace and stability. I will not permit that to happen under my watch. Our forebears paid too high a price, with their blood and toil, to bequeath to us this beautiful nation; the lives of our citizens are too precious to waste.

So, let us come together shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand and let us all be guided by the inspirational words of (the second stanza of) our national anthem:

"Hail to thy name, O Ghana,
To thee we make our solemn vow:
Steadfast to build together
A nation strong in Unity;
With our gifts of mind and strength of arm,
Whether night or day, in the midst of storm,
In every need, whatever the call may be,
To serve thee, Ghana, now and for evermore."

Mr. Speaker, we have our challenges, but our nation is in good health.

I thank you very much for your attention.

May God bless us all, and our homeland Ghana, and make her great and strong.