

**MESSAGE ON THE STATE OF THE NATION DELIVERED BY THE
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, NANA ADDO DANKWA AKUFO-
ADDO, ON THURSDAY, 8TH FEBRUARY, 2018, IN PARLIAMENT,
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, ACCRA**

Mr Speaker,

I am happy to be here again in this august House, a place where I have experienced some of the most memorable moments of my political career, and made some cherished friendships across the political divide. I am glad too that, in accordance with protocol and convention, First Lady Rebecca Akufo-Addo, Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, Second Lady Samira Bawumia, Chief Justice Sophia Akuffo, and the 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 the 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, John Agyekum Kufuor and John Dramani Mahama, His Excellency the former Vice President of the Republic, Paa Kwasi Amissah-Arthur, and former First Lady, Her Excellency Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings.

A year ago, I came as our newly-elected President into a House, where everybody was trying to get used to new positions. There was a large number of fresh entrants, trying to find their feet as the new honourable members. There were the hitherto Minority members, trying to get used to being members of the Majority, and, then, there were the former members of the Majority, trying to get used to their new role as members of the Minority. The House had a new Speaker, who was beginning to fit seamlessly into his new role.

A year later, we can safely say that none of us now turns round in surprise, when addressed by our new titles. We are all used to the reality, made possible by the expression of the free will of the Ghanaian people on December 7, 2016.

Mr Speaker, at the beginning of each session of Parliament, the President has a duty to come to this House, as I have done today, to satisfy the constitutional requirement of delivering to Parliament a Message on the

State of the Nation, that is to report on how our nation is faring after this year of change, and to share the prospects we can look forward to in the year ahead.

I would like to start by expressing my sincere gratitude to the House. When I told you I was in a hurry, you promptly rose to the challenge. You assisted me to appoint my excellent team of ministers, and constitute the government, in record time. I understand that, since the inception of the 4th Republic, this, the 7th, has been the busiest Parliament. You have had 140 days of sittings, and I am told no Parliament, in its first session, has done more than 130 days. This is to the collective credit of members on both sides of the House and your respective leaderships, with the backing of the Right Honourable Speaker and his Deputies.

In the process, this Parliament has passed a number of bills relating to my flagship programmes. Again, I am told it is a first in the 4th Republic that flagship programmes, and, in this case, as many as five, have been passed in the first year of the government.

I am grateful, and look forward to our continuing to work together to make our nation, Ghana, great and strong.

Mr Speaker, I believe that last year, when I came to the House, I conveyed my dismay at the full extent of the economic mess, in which our nation was mired. We had inherited an economy that was in distress, choked by debt, and with macroeconomic fundamentals in disarray.

You would recall, Mr Speaker, that I said “we would have to implement some tough, prudent and innovative policies to get us out of the financial cul de sac we were in”. I made some brave predictions. I said we would “reduce significantly the budget deficit”, and I said that, at the same time, we would grow and expand the economy.

I am glad to be able to report that the Economic Management Team, under the stellar leadership of the strong, brilliant economist, Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, has risen to the challenge, and the hard work is beginning to show positive results.

We have reduced taxes, we are bringing down inflation and interest rates, economic growth is increasing, from the alarming 3.6% at December 2016, to 7.9% in our first year, and the indications are that it will be even better this year. We have increased our international reserves, maintained relative exchange rate stability, reduced the debt to GDP ratio and the rate of debt accumulation, we have paid almost half of arrears inherited, and, crucially, we are current on obligations to statutory funds. I am also pleased to report that the 3-year IMF-supported Extended Credit Facility Programme, begun in 2015, comes to an end this year. The relatively good macroeconomic performance in 2017 will strongly support our successful completion of the IMF programme. We are determined to put in place measures to ensure irreversibility, and sustain macroeconomic stability, so that we will have no reason to seek again the assistance of that powerful global body.

Mr. Speaker, we have restored teacher and nursing training allowances. We have doubled the capitation grant, and, to confound the sceptics and professional naysayers, we have implemented Free Senior High School education. It has enabled 90,000 more students gain access to Senior High School education, in 2017, than in 2016. Mr Speaker, we have, nevertheless, been able to meet my promise made last year to the House, and reduced the fiscal deficit from 9.3%, to an estimated 5.6% of GDP.

As I promised, our economists have found imaginative ways to deal with the oppressive debt situation. This has brought some relief, and the annual average rate of debt accumulation, which, in recent years, has been as high as 36%, has declined to 13.6%, as at September 2017. As a result, the public debt stock as a ratio of GDP is 68.3%, against the annual target of 71% for 2017, and end 2016 actual figure of 73.1%. As a result of appropriate policy, and the normalisation of the power situation in the country, they have also engineered a spectacular revival of Ghanaian industry, from a growth rate of -0.5% in 2016 to 17.7% in 2017.

Mr Speaker, I do not suggest, in any way, that these headline-grabbing figures mean we are anywhere near resolving our economic problems. I am saying, to borrow the language of the economists, that, for the first time in a long while, our macroeconomic fundamentals are solid, and all the critical indices are pointing in the right direction.

And the world is taking notice of Ghana's economic strides. Earlier, in January, the World Bank stated that Ghana's economy would probably grow by 8.3% this year, which would make it the fastest growing economy in the world.

And, then, last week, Bloomberg described Ghana's Stock Exchange as the best-performing Stock Exchange in the world for January 2018. The report illustrated how the Ghana Stock Exchange Composite Index has gained 19% since the start of the year, in dollar terms, ahead of the Nigerian, Chinese and Brazilian Stock Markets. Ken Ofori-Atta, the Finance Minister, is proving to be a national asset.

I know that, when it comes to the economy, many of us have very low tolerance for what we consider as boring figures, and we do not see that they affect the reality of our everyday lives. But, as I said earlier in the year, this current set of boring figures happens to spell good news for our economy.

There are figures that the most innumerate among us can relate to, and which can hardly be described as boring. I refer to the figures that emerge when you look at the difference between sole sourcing of government procurement, and opening it to tender.

In 2016, the Public Procurement Authority had six hundred and twenty two (622) Sole Source Requests. Five hundred and ninety seven (597) of that number, 98%, were approved, and there were 25 Rejections. There were five hundred and ninety two (592) Requests made for Restricted Tenders, and five hundred and eighty seven (587) (99.15%) were approved, and there were five (5) Rejections. A grand total of zero savings was made.

In 2017, my first year in office, three hundred and ninety four (394) Sole Sourcing Requests were made, out of which two hundred and twenty three (223) (56.6%) were approved, and one hundred and seventy one (171) (43.4%) rejected. There were three hundred and forty six (346) Requests for Restricted Tenders, out of which one hundred and sixty seven (167) (48%) were approved, and one hundred and seventy nine (179) (52%) rejected. Now here is the interesting part. The savings, made over the year as a result, amounted to some GH¢800 million.

Mr Speaker, the savings are spectacular, and the figures are impressive, and, as my old Mathematics teacher and, I suspect, everybody else's Mathematics teacher would say, you cannot argue with figures. We have taken the lessons to heart, and continue to improve upon the government procurement process. I said I would protect the public purse, and that is exactly what I am doing.

I believe it bears repeating here that, thanks to these boring figures, for the first time in a long while, we have been able to provide better budgetary support to the constitutionally-mandated institutions that hold government accountable, i.e. Auditor-General, Parliament, Judiciary, Ministry of Justice, Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), the Economic and Organised Crime Office (EOCO), and the Police. Again, nowhere near the levels we would all like, but, when you are starting from inside a deep hole, it takes a while to make an impression on the ground, and the good thing is that we are pointing in the right direction.

Mr. Speaker, thanks to the diligence of the hardworking Minister for Employment and Labour Relations, Hon. Ignatius Baffuor Awuah, MP for Sunyani West, we have been able to transfer some GH¢3.1 billion of Tier 2 pension funds into the custodial accounts of the pension schemes of the labour unions, funds that have been outstanding for six years, and about which the labour unions had been loudly complaining. As a result of engagements with organised labour, we ensured that the National Daily Minimum Wage was determined and approved before the laying of the 2018 budget by the Minister for Finance, and, happily, Mr. Speaker, there were no strike actions last year. We will continue the constructive dialogue with organised labour to find mutually satisfactory solutions to their concerns, in order to guarantee industrial peace.

Mr Speaker, we are, therefore, able to say with confidence that we are creating the atmosphere needed for the creation of jobs, easily the most urgent problem that faces the government and the nation. We have put in place the structures to help small and medium scale enterprises and budding entrepreneurs through the challenging start-up years. The availability of cheaper credit is good news for business in general, and means better prospects for jobs.

Mr. Speaker, the subject of job creation has to be at the top of my agenda. The number of young people, who cannot find work, is staggering, and a threat to our national security. I am determined to work to guarantee and secure the future of the young men and women of our country. Every major policy that my government has implemented in the past year has been essentially about the youth. We will equip the youth with the skills that will enable them to be productive. As a start, this government has established the Nation Builders Corps to employ 100,000 young persons, in 2018 alone, to assist in public sector service delivery in health, education, agriculture, sanitation and the revenue collection department of the Ghana Revenue Authority (GRA). Stakeholders have had a series of meetings on this policy, and the modules have been designed for each of the designated areas. The details are currently being fine-tuned, and next month, this policy will formally take off to join the other youth employment initiatives. Just this morning, the respected Senior Minister, Yaw Osafo Maafo, launched the Digital Marketing and Entrepreneurship Programme at the Accra Digital Centre. This programme, with ten regional training centres, has already recruited 3,000 young, unemployed people, to undergo a 3-month all-expenses-paid training. I am happy to announce that Ecobank Ghana Ltd has already offered to engage all 3,000 young people, after the training programme. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Mr Speaker, for years we have all talked about the need to open up our country. We have all acknowledged that we cannot hope to develop and transform our nation until we do so, and economic and administrative activities are spread around, and not restricted to the capital in Accra.

We have taken the clear and unambiguous mandate given to this government by the people of Ghana as a spur to take some of these long promised actions, indeed, to open up our country and transform our economy. This year we are determined to take the decisions that would change the destiny of our country.

On the first working day of this year, I signed into law the Acts setting up the Development Authorities. Mr Speaker, the creation of these Authorities marks a fundamental change in how part of the development budget, i.e. the equivalent of \$1 million per constituency per year, is going to be spent in our country.

Local people will make the decision on what their greatest needs are, and direct the funds to those areas. Luckily, there is some consensus on what constitutes the basic infrastructure needs in all communities, and we expect a smooth take-off in the work of these authorities. We are asking that everybody is guided by the priorities set up in the NPP Manifesto, on which we fought and won the mandate of the Ghanaian people. We expect, for example, the provision of water and toilets to feature prominently on the agenda of the Development Authorities, until those two items can be taken off the must-do list of all constituencies around the country. Sixty years after independence, the least we can, and should, do is to make sure that every Ghanaian has access to water and toilet facilities.

Mr Speaker, the state of sanitation in our cities is wholly unacceptable. Our cities have been engulfed by filth. There is the urgent need for public authorities to find means of making our cities clean, and, in the case of Accra, fulfilling my pledge, one of the most ambitious of my presidency, to make it the cleanest city in Africa, by the end of my term. Government is working with various private sector operators to tackle this major challenge, with strategies that are intended to effect a change in our attitudes towards waste generation, as well as to improve dramatically our methods of waste management. This will be complemented by the strict enforcement of sanitation rules and regulations. Urgent attention will be given to clearing of rubbish all around the country. Apart from the systematic efforts being made to resolve the legacy of inherited debts in the sector, Government will spend, this year, an amount of GH¢200 million to address the vexed issue of sanitation. I am confident that, by the time I come back next year, God willing, an appreciable improvement would have been made in the sanitation situation in the country.

Mr Speaker, there have been a number of ambitious decentralization exercises in this country. We are currently engaged in the very big exercise of creating new regions. It is a long and rather-complicated process. We are in uncharted territory, but all the indications are that it is going well, and I have been impressed to see political opponents come together to argue, for example, the case for the creation of an Oti or North Volta region. It is not often you see the veteran statesman, Dr Obed Asamoah, the vocal Mr Kofi Adams, and the Volta Regional Minister, Dr. Archibald

Letsa, on the same side in a public argument. This portends well, and I believe this exercise will be a success, especially as it is being undertaken with scrupulous adherence to the teachings of the Constitution in this sensitive area, under the skilful direction of the experienced Minister for Regional Reorganisation and Development, Hon. Dan Botwe, MP for Okere.

Mr. Speaker, yet another ambitious decentralisation exercise is the expansion of full democracy to local government. A critical step, to this end, is the direct election of Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executives on a partisan basis. It is a firm manifesto commitment of the New Patriotic Party. Further, my discussions with the nation's political leaders, including the former Presidents of the Republic, convince me that it is a step we must take. The constitutional impediment to this, in Article 55 of the Constitution, an entrenched clause, must, therefore, be removed. To ensure the judicious use of the country's resources, I propose that the constitutional processes for a Referendum should be initiated in such a manner that the holding of the Referendum will take place at the same time as next year's District Assembly elections. If successful, the outcome of the Referendum will mean that the current set of MMDCEs will be the last batch of Chief Executives to be appointed under the current system. I have no doubt that the resourceful Minister for Local Government and Rural Development, Hajia Alima Mahama, MP for Nalerigu Gambaga, will be able to shepherd this process to a positive conclusion.

But, Mr Speaker, I am convinced that the creation of new regions alone would not open up our country. That would not, on its own, convince our young people that they do not have to come to Accra to make a living. We have to improve upon the transportation system so that no part of this country feels cut off, or can be deemed to be too far from the centre.

That is one of the most effective ways to stop the unsustainable rush to Accra. Traffic jams and overcrowding are making our capital unattractive. There are certain inconveniences that people adjust to. Traffic jams are not one of them. We are spending too much time stuck in traffic, it is unproductive, it is not healthy, and it is expensive. I fear that one of these days one more car will join the madness on the roads in Accra, and our city will be completely gridlocked.

Mr Speaker, we have to build the roads to open up and link up the various parts of the country. Journey times between parts of the country have to be reduced. It is a shame that, some seven years or so after work had started on the Eastern Corridor roads, we are nowhere near completion. And, yet, this is a strategic road, that would provide a much shorter and cheaper link between the southern and northern parts of our country, and a suitable, alternative route for our land-locked neighbours.

Unfortunately, this network of roads has suffered from deliberate, unproductive propaganda. It is hard to believe that, at a time when cocoa prices were going down, contracts were awarded for three sections of the road to be funded by COCOBOD. It comes as no surprise that COCOBOD has issued directives to suspend work on all three sections, which come up to almost 100 kilometres. Mr Speaker, we are determined to find the needed resources to complete the Eastern Corridor roads. As I have heard it said among the Ewes, that which is important, you cook in an important pot. Mr. Speaker, ***NU VEVE LA, WO DANE LE EZE VEVE ME.***

There is a crying need for work to be done on all our roads. The Western Corridor, the Central Corridor, trunk roads, feeder roads, town roads, around the country, all require urgent attention. We are determined to bring our road network to a befitting status, and this year we shall witness much more activity on the roads.

In our current economic circumstances, we are turning our attention to private sector participation to raise the funds to do what needs to be done. I must make mention of the work being done to restore the Accra-Tema motorway to its iconic status. With help from Japan, a loyal friend of Ghana, work is starting to build a three-tier interchange at the motorway roundabout, and the plans for expansion into a six-lane motorway will be implemented from this year.

Mr Speaker, if we are to open up our country, we have to build a fast, safe and reliable railway network. Last year, I made a brave assertion in this House by stating that the Takoradi to Paga railway would be initiated in the year 2017. I am happy to report that we are making progress. We are in the final stages of agreeing with a significant investor the terms of a BOT Agreement, from Takoradi to Kumasi, which will be presented to Parliament this session. There is already a contractor on site for the

construction of the Kojokrom to Manso section of the Takoradi to Kumasi rail line. The process has commenced to select a suitable partner for the construction of the Eastern Line, from Accra to Tema to Kumasi. We aim to break ground this year. The Central Spine, from Kumasi to Paga, is also receiving attention, and consultants have been engaged to advise government on the best model for the development of the line.

Mr Speaker, with reference to the Ghana and Burkina Faso rail interconnectivity, the two countries are in earnest discussions as to the realisation of the project. There are fortnightly meetings, either in Accra or Ouagadougou, and we are confident that deliberations will conclude, and actual construction will commence by the third quarter of this year.

Mr Speaker, I know I am not saying anything new exactly; every government has said it, and it has been in every plan we have drawn up in this country since independence. But the difference this time is that we have started, and the dream of a modern railway network in our country will become a reality during the tenure of this administration.

Mr Speaker, a modern, reliable network of roads, railways, water transport and airports would transform our country, and I am delighted to note that fresh enthusiasm has entered the aviation sector, under the guidance of the dynamic Minister for Aviation, Cecilia Abena Dapaah, to link up all parts of the country by air.

Mr Speaker, the advance of technology means we can reach people, and get a lot done without much physical movement. The cyber population, that is busy on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and other social media outlets, would testify that Ghana is very much part of the virtual world and its activities. More and more of us are banking, and paying our bills, online. A wealth of knowledge and information is now available on the net to make teaching and learning easier. We are working to make the child that sits in a classroom in Zebilla have the same opportunities as the child in a classroom in Ridge, in Accra. In their own way, these modern communication tools are opening up our country and the world to us all.

The start of the digital address system, the introduction of paperless transactions at our ports, the rapid and continuing spread of broadband services are all helping to formalise and modernise our economy, thanks to

the creative leadership of the intrepid Minister for Communications, Hon. Ursula Owusu-Ekuful, MP for Ablekuma West. Furthermore, subsequent to Cabinet approval, the framework agreement between Ghana and the Republic of Mauritius, for an initial investment in the development of a technology park in Dawa, in the Greater Accra Region, has been ratified by Parliament for implementation to begin. Unfortunately, and predictably, a whole new set of dangers of cyber insecurity and fraud have emerged with these modern tools. We are working to strengthen cyber security to build confidence, and protect the use of electronic communications in national development, and ensure that our young technologically savvy people would keep Ghana firmly in the exciting IT economy and its many opportunities.

Mr Speaker, we need an educated and skilled workforce to be able to operate the modern economy we are creating. The Free SHS is a start towards this goal. It is a policy that has come to stay. We are reforming the schools' curricula to deal with the weaknesses in our education system, and lay greater emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (S.T.E.M), reading, history, and technical and vocational skills. A look at the national budget would tell you we are spending a lot of money on education, and I am certain that it is a worthwhile investment, being brilliantly supervised by that charismatic Minister for Education, Hon. Dr. Matthew Opoku Prempeh, Member of Parliament for Manhyia South. It is, in my view, also important that the reform of our schools' curricula should instil in our youth respect for the traditional values of discipline, fellow-feeling, hard work, honesty, integrity, and patriotism, without which no healthy, social development can occur.

In much the same way, we dare not compromise on the health of the population. We have cleared a substantial part of the debts and arrears that were choking the National Health Insurance Scheme, courtesy of the prudent management of the able chartered accountant, Health Minister Hon. Kwaku Agyemang Manu, MP for Dormaa Central. This has led to the revival of the NHIS, and the renewal of respect for the NHIS card. The health needs of our people are being better served. Moreover, as we work to open up the country, I hope that our efforts at improving the conditions of work for health workers would be appreciated, and there would no longer be the reluctance to serve in some parts of Ghana.

Mr. Speaker, in line with our commitment to building a fair and inclusive society, we promised, last year, to increase the share of the District Assemblies Common Fund to Persons With Disabilities from 2 percent to 3 percent, and we delivered. Effective July last year, the policy of ensuring that 50% of the persons who manage the country's toll booths are Persons With Disabilities started. Nonetheless, we are determined to address the other concerns of Persons living With Disabilities.

A healthy nation, Mr Speaker, is a well-fed nation. For generations, we have bemoaned Ghana's reliance solely on rain-fed agriculture. This means the slightest change in the rainfall pattern exposed our farmers to the loss of a season's harvest. It is a disgrace that we have had to rely on our Sahelian neighbours to make up the deficit in foods, such as vegetables.

This year, the One-Village-One-Dam project starts full operation. It is a simple, low-tech project, but these dams will make a big difference to all our lives and the livelihoods of our farmers. Already, many of the little dams that had been abandoned, have been rehabilitated and brought back into use. A deliberate and specific intervention to help farmers is paying off. Our farmers can see that the government is putting resources to back up the usual words. The 50% subsidy on fertilizer, and the increase in the provision of extension services, are making a great difference to the performance of Ghanaian agriculture.

Under the Planting for Food and Jobs scheme, we are witnessing a fresh interest in farming. The success of the first year has encouraged us to increase the scope of the programme, and, this year, some half a million farmers would be signed on, up from the figure of two hundred thousand (200,000) last year. That champion of Ghanaian farmers, the Minister for Food and Agriculture, Dr. Owusu Afriyie Akoto, is doing a yeoman's job.

Mr. Speaker, fishing in our country, an industry that provides a living for ten percent of the population, has been bedeviled by many problems in the past. The fishing harvest has gone down dramatically, and we have had to depend more and more on imported fish. We have started work to tackle these problems. This past year, we made sure that the close season was respected not just by the industrial tuna vessels, but, also, by the trawlers. We will adhere to this policy for the foreseeable future, which should help us replenish our depleted stocks.

More effective measures are being taken against illegal, unreported and unregulated methods of fishing. We have also instituted measures to avert premix diversions, and strict auditing of landing beaches are in place. I can state that, since November, there has been no report of premix diversion, a marked improvement from the past. Mr. Speaker, I believe that the future lies in the promotion of aquaculture, and we have set about it with a lot of enthusiasm. We have identified 100 dams in five regions across the country – Upper East, Upper West, Northern, Volta and Western – and stocked them with fingerlings. This is the start of big things to come, due to the efforts of the forceful Minister for Fisheries and Aquaculture, Hon. Elizabeth Afoley Quaye, MP for Krowor.

Mr Speaker, agriculture forms the backbone of our flagship 1-District-1-Factory programme. The majority of the proposals that have been evaluated and accepted for support under the scheme are agro-based. It is food processing, after all, that has been the take-off point for industrialization in most developed societies. It also fits in with our determination to open up our country, and make jobs and facilities available in all parts of the country.

Mr Speaker, problems associated with our environment and the galamsey phenomenon have taken up a lot of the time and energy of this government. The fight against galamsey is being spearheaded by a high-powered Inter-Ministerial Committee, led by the globally-acclaimed Ghanaian scientist, Prof. Kwabena Frimpong Boateng, Minister for Science, Technology, Environment and Innovation, supported by the indefatigable Minister for Lands and Natural Resources, John Peter Amewu. This Committee is waging a valiant struggle to bring the galamsey phenomenon under control. Its work has received, thankfully, the wide support of the media. Mr Speaker, we have had to ban small-scale mining for the past **nine months**. We acknowledge that the banning of small-scale mining cannot be the long-term solution in a country such as ours, which is blessed with so many minerals; but, as the saying goes, desperate situations call for desperate remedies.

We cannot look on, as our very existence as a country is put in jeopardy and our water bodies, forests and land mass are destroyed. Even with the ban, it has been a never-ending battle with the galamseyers, and I am sure

the House will want to join me, in paying tribute to the members of our forces in the Operation Vanguard that are protecting our environment. They are Ghanaian patriots of the first order. We have started various schemes to find sustainable alternative sources of income for the galamsayers. Mr Speaker, nothing will ever equate the attraction of the search for gold or diamond, and maybe the drama of actually finding some, but this generation of Ghanaians dares not preside over the destruction of our lands. The state of our rivers and forests remains a great cause for worry, and it is our sacred duty to protect them. I hope I can count on the total support of the House to help nurse our degraded lands and rivers back to health.

I am equally grateful to those chiefs, who have supported the fight against galamsey. My government will continue to reach out to our traditional rulers, so that, together, we can address pressing issues facing our nation, and its peace and stability.

Mr Speaker, there is relief in some areas, and I refer specifically to the spectacular improvement in our power supply problems. A lot of hard work has gone into easing the intolerable debt situation that threatened to paralyse the energy industry. We still have problems with the cost of power, and we are working to put Ghana at a competitive advantage. We intend to find private sector operators to buy into the state owned thermal plants, and inject the capital needed to bring power tariffs down for both domestic and commercial consumers. The most reliable, and, ultimately, cheapest answer to our power needs, lies with renewable energy sources. We shall promote and enthusiastically encourage investment and use of renewable energy. I am sure that the House shares my relief that DUMSOR is no longer part of our everyday lexicon. Long may it stay so, as we applaud the efforts of the tireless Minister, Energy Minister Boakye Agyarko.

Mr Speaker, the safety and security of our people are at the heart of all that we do. Ghanaian citizens have a right to expect to go about their daily lives in an atmosphere of peace. A Ghanaian has a right to expect that those who break the law must be subjected to the sanctions laid down under the law. The police, the prosecution services and the judiciary owe it to all of us to make us feel and be safe. I do not need to repeat that crime

wears no political colours, and I am certain that message has gone down to all. Mr Speaker, the law enforcement agencies will crack down very hard on all those who would disturb the peace of our nation. We will give the Police the resources they need to do their job. An initial amount of GH¢800 million is being made available to procure and supply, within the next six months, critical, modern policing equipment and gadgets to enhance the capacity of the police to enforce law and order, including one thousand (1,000) vehicles, motorbikes, and ammunition. The equipment is to facilitate visibility, mobility and improved responsiveness of the police to ensure a safe, secure and peaceful economic and social environment for Ghanaians to work and thrive. Already, the successful renegotiation of existing contracts has enabled us purchase, forthwith, 100 vehicles for the Police.

In the medium to long-term, we will purchase drones and helicopters to assist the police combat violent and environmental crime. The crime laboratories will be modernised, and properly equipped to provide the necessary support. The police intelligence unit will also be strengthened. The perennial problems associated with police accommodation will be tackled, and a compensation package introduced to cover officers in their line of duty.

Mr. Speaker, I am aware that the entire nation is extremely anxious and perturbed by the activities of the migrant, nomadic herdsmen in the country. We are rehabilitating the kraals or ranches that were abandoned after the Kufuor-led NPP government left office in 2009. They will become operational shortly to provide secure, grazing places for cattle. At the same time, efforts are also being intensified to find an ECOWAS-wide solution to an issue, which goes beyond the boundaries of our country, and is affecting the entire West African region.

Mr Speaker, we shall not allow miscreants of any sort to terrorize our population; and I promise that there will be no hiding place for criminals. I am certain that the interventions we are introducing will boost morale in the service, and I urge the House and all citizens to support the police to deliver the service we deserve. The formidable Minister for the Interior, Hon. Ambrose Dery, MP for Nandom, needs our effective co-operation to carry out his all-important functions.

In much the same way, we are beginning to address the problems of our Armed Forces. I am happy to report that work has started on the Barracks Regeneration Programme. The acute accommodation problems that face our Armed Forces must be, and are now being tackled by that energetic Minister for Defence, Hon. Dominic Nitiwul, MP for Bimbilla. We know that it is in all our interests, that those charged with ensuring our security, and who put their lives on the line for our safety, are able to concentrate on their jobs without distractions like inadequate and inappropriate housing. It is vital that all of us give maximum support to the noble and brave men and women of our security services, involved in Operation Calm Life, Operation Vanguard, and Operation Cow Leg, aimed at guaranteeing the safety of our people, the integrity of our environment, and the peace of our nation.

Mr Speaker, the housing deficit is not limited to our security services, it is a nationwide problem that is caused mostly by the intolerable pressure on land prices. This has put affordable housing out of the reach of most people. We have begun the difficult process of making housing affordable for Ghanaians. Government, last year, abolished the 5% VAT/NHIL on real estate sales, and continues to create a conducive environment that is reducing interest rates on mortgage loans. Discussions are also on-going between the Pensions Regulatory Authority and the Banks to underwrite an effective mortgage system. This will facilitate access to housing for the ordinary budget. Government will also continue to create the enabling environment that will promote private sector investment in cheaper housing for the people.

Mr Speaker, I am sure no one needs reminding in this House that I have signed into law, the Office of Special Prosecutor Act, an essential step in our overall strategy to combat corruption. I look forward to the House dealing speedily with the process of confirmation of the nominee, a person of proven professional ability, with an established record of integrity and independence of character. Here again, we are in uncharted waters, but I am convinced that there is enough goodwill in the country to propel the first occupant of this position into setting a good and firm foundation for the position of the Special Prosecutor.

Mr Speaker, year in, year out, the nation's Auditor-General produces a report on our public finances. It is often full of grand cases of corruption in our public services. The Auditor-General's Report on MDA liabilities as at 31st December, 2016, makes truly alarming reading. I make reference to the fact that a staggering amount of GH¢5.4 billion has been identified as constituting fictitious claims. In the course of this address, Mr Speaker, the House has heard me struggle to identify a source of funding to build our roads. Every day, we hear reports on our radios and televisions of dilapidated classrooms, and children who sit on floors at school. Just think of the difference that GH¢5.4 billion would make to the nation's finances. That would certainly be enough to build and furnish hundreds of classrooms, and construct the Eastern Corridor roads. Every citizen is affected by acts of corruption, and we should all work to tackle them. Government has an obligation to treat the Auditor-General's Report seriously, and to work to retrieve illegally acquired monies from those who would impoverish us all. The role of OccupyGhana, in increasing awareness of the importance of the work of the Auditor-General, should be recognised.

Mr. Speaker, the Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic enjoins each one of us to uphold the principles of Freedom and Justice, Probity and Accountability. In furtherance of these principles, I have made it publicly known that anyone, who has information about acts of corruption by any of my appointees, should bring it forward, and should be prepared to back it up with evidence, for I will have it investigated. So far, every single alleged act of corruption levelled against any of my appointees has been investigated by independent bodies, and, in some cases, by Parliament itself, and the findings made public. From the allegations against the Minister-Designate for Energy at his parliamentary confirmation hearings; to that against the CEO of BOST; to those against the two deputy Chiefs of Staff; to the conflict of interest allegations against the Minister for Finance; and, most recently, to the claims of extortion against the Trade and Industry Minister – they have all been investigated, and no evidence has been adduced to suggest any act of corruption, conflict of interest or wrongdoing. It appears, however, that some are determined to stick to their politically-motivated view that there has been corruption. This, surely, is not helpful. It is important to note that, in my first year of office, despite having a clear parliamentary majority, two separate bi-partisan probes in

Parliament have been established to inquire into allegations of corruption, as against zero in recent years, notwithstanding the persistent calls by the then Minority over several allegations. Mr. Speaker, with the greatest of respect, and in the words of the articulate Minister for Information, Mustapha Abdul-Hamid, no matter how long a log stays under water, it will never become a crocodile.

Mr. Speaker, there was great relief around the country when the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea found in our favour in the maritime boundary dispute with Cote d'Ivoire, a dispute which was litigated by successive governments in the national interest, the last lap being run by the able Attorney General, Ms Gloria Akuffo. In our celebrations, we did not forget that good neighbourliness is the hallmark of our foreign policy, and I am glad to state that our good relations with Cote d'Ivoire have not been affected in any way by the resolution of the dispute. Indeed, Cote d'Ivoire's renowned President, His Excellency M. Alassane Ouattara, at my invitation, paid us a memorable, official visit, after the ruling, to underline his country's determination to maintain, if not deepen, its good relations with our own.

In fact, as you may remember, he and I signed, on that occasion, L'Accord Strategique de Partenariat (A Strategic Partnership Agreement, for those who find French difficult), to emphasise the enhanced relationship we both seek for our two neighbouring countries. Another obvious, immediate benefit from the sensible reaction of both sides to the outcome of the dispute is the subsequent agreement by ExxonMobil, the world's largest publicly traded oil and gas company, to explore and develop, with us, potentially rich oil blocks that were affected by the dispute.

Mr. Speaker, much as we all recognise the importance of exploiting the offshore hydrocarbon resources of our nation, I think it equally critical for us not to ignore the possibilities of our onshore deposits, especially in the Voltaian Basin. So, last year, I directed our state-owned oil development company, the Ghana National Petroleum Corporation (GNPC), to pay particular attention to this potential. It is good to hear that that directive appears to be yielding dividends, as GNPC, from the results of its pilot survey in the Voltaian basin, has established the presence of a working

petroleum system. I hope that, eventually, there will be something big for us to cheer about.

Mr. Speaker, this year, we will continue the process of passing the Legislative Instruments of the National Youth and Sports Act, pursue the enactment of the draft National Sports College Bill, and create a Sports Fund to improve sports development in the country. Government also remains committed to the development of football in the country. We have begun the rehabilitation of the Accra Sports Stadium, aka Ohene Djan Sports Stadium, and in partnership with the Inner City and Zongo Development Ministry and the Ghana Football Association, we are constructing a number of football pitches in the Zongos and across the rest of the country, to aid in the revival of colts football, which has been responsible for the production of talents like Abedi Pele and Tony Yeboah. We need to catch the talents at a young age, if Ghanaian football is to continue with its traditions of excellence, and perform well on the national and international stage.

Mr Speaker, we, in Ghana, are proud members of regional, continental and global communities. Since my inauguration, I have been active, with the help of the eloquent Foreign Minister, Hon. Shirley Ayorkor Botchway, MP for Anyaa Sowutuom, in keeping up and promoting the historical role of Ghana within these communities, a role of independent, sovereign action in the supreme interest of the Ghanaian and African peoples. I have travelled around our neighbourhood and beyond, and I am glad to report that the Black Star is shining. It is the reason for the unprecedented numbers of world leaders – African, Asian and European – who have thronged our shores this past year, and enjoyed our renowned Ghanaian hospitality. It explains also the warmth with which I am greeted wherever I go in the world.

Mr Speaker, a country's image turns on the most unlikely things and events. It could be because of the exploits of a football team, like Brazil, it could be because of the exploits of one athlete, like Frankie Fredericks for Namibia or Maria Mutola for Mozambique, it could be because of a highlife connoisseur like E.T. Mensah for Ghana, a singer/trumpeter like Hugh Masekela for South Africa. The image of a country can be made forever, because of a William Shakespeare or an Anton Chekov or a Chinua Achebe

or an Ayi Kwei Amarh. The image could hinge simply on a Mona Lisa painting or a David Adjaye's inspired structure.

I am, therefore, very much aware that we have to create the space and atmosphere for our artists and creatives, and we shall support them. The foundations for the passing of the Creative Arts Bill have been laid, and, ultimately, processes for the setting up of the Creative Arts Fund will be completed to enable our creative artists to access funds to boost their art.

Mr Speaker, as we make progress in our undertakings, more and more people will come to Ghana to find things out for themselves, to conduct business and, increasingly, simply as tourists to experience our country and enjoy themselves. I am happy to report that we have now recognized the need to go further than our reputation for being hospitable. We are building a Ghana, where tourists will feel at home, and we shall feel proud when they say "I was in Ghana." On December 15, 2017, I joined the chiefs and people of Osu and Gbese to cut the sod for the 241-acre Accra Marine Drive Project. This project, during construction and upon completion, will generate thousands of jobs for the local community and across the value chain, and position Ghana as a key tourism destination.

Mr Speaker, I have an apology to make to the House. I promised last year we would endeavour to pass into law the Affirmative Action Bill. This did not happen. My commitment to the promotion of the advancement of women is without question. Women constitute the majority of the population, and our success or otherwise as a nation will be measured by how well women are doing. The Bill will definitely come to Parliament this session.

In the meantime, I have thrown my full weight behind the HeforShe campaign, and the Gender and Development Initiative for Africa (GADIA), an initiative stemming from my position as the African Union's Gender Champion. I urge all Ghanaian males to join together in giving Ghanaian females the dignity they deserve, as tenaciously promoted by the polyglot Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, Otiko Afisa Djaba. I further entreat all of us, male and female, to support the implementation of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which have been incorporated into Government's Coordinated Programme of Economic and Social Development Policies, which was laid before this House on 13th

November, 2017, and the execution of which will ensure that no Ghanaian is left behind.

Mr Speaker, on 7th January, the 4th Republic attained 25 years of age, its Silver Jubilee. It has proved to be the most enduring and most successful of the four republics of our history. Its Constitution has enabled us to establish our State on sound democratic principles, on the basis of the separation of powers, the rule of law and respect for human rights. It has witnessed three peaceful transitions, through the ballot box, from one democratically elected government of one party, to another of another party. It has promoted our nation as a beacon of stability, and a model of democratic engagement on the African continent. It was to celebrate this collective achievement of the Ghanaian people and the unity of the Ghanaian nation that I organised, on that day, an inter-faith religious ceremony of thanksgiving to Almighty God, graced by the presence of my three predecessors, their Excellencies the 1st, 2nd and 4th Presidents of the 4th Republic, Jerry John Rawlings, John Agyekum Kufuor and John Dramani Mahama. I thank them for their contribution to the service, and thank all the Eminent Clergy, of both the Christian and Islamic persuasions, who conducted and participated in the solemn, moving ceremony. Long may the 4th Republic flourish.

Mr Speaker, our nation is on the right path. We will build a Ghana Beyond Aid. I thank you very much for your attention. May God bless us all, our Parliament, and our nation Ghana, and make her great and strong.