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PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA

ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF A HIGH LEVEL CONFERENCE ON THE NATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION ACTION PLAN (NACAP)
Monday December 08, 2014

Mr. Chairman,
Deputy Commissioners of CHRAJ,
Hon. Attorney-General and Minister of Justice,
Heads of Faith-Based Organisations
Development Partners,
Distinguished Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be here today at this conference and to be able to address you on this subject. I say this more than cordially; I say it truthfully. It is a pleasure to be able to address you today because I welcome any and every opportunity to engage in candid and constructive dialogue about corruption and ways to combat it.

Corruption, by its very definition, is a distortion of something that is intended to be the standard. It is an abuse of both trust and power. It is an exploitation of the weaknesses and gaps in our systems.

Corruption is a stain on our society, an enemy of our progress as a nation. Corruption undermines the very principles of democracy, principles in which I believe and hold dear, both personally and politically. That is why, as far back as the very beginning of my tenure as Vice President, I have committed myself to minimizing corruption, especially at the top levels of government, by intensifying the battle against it.

I realize that this may not be in line with what is often touted as the public's perception of our leaders, but it is the truth. The disparity between these two impressions is what compels me to begin this speech with an examination of "perception versus reality." Perception and reality, as I'm sure we're all aware, are not always in agreement. Sometimes how we believe things to be is not necessarily how things actually are.

I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, implying that corruption does not exist. We all know that it does, in every nation and, I dare say, in every institution and organization- governmental as well as nongovernmental- from the worker who pilfers paperclips, pens and other office products, to the one who embezzles large sums of money.

What is debatable is the degree to which corruption exists, and it is during this debate that “perception” and “reality” usually part ways.

It’s interesting to note that each president in this country has been accused of being corrupt, of allowing corruption to persist. Each administration has, at some point, been accused of steering Ghana into the worst period of corruption in its history. Were those allegations based on reality, or an incorrect perception, a false belief?

Whatever your answer to that question, the one thing I think we can agree on, both as perception and as reality; the one thing those consistent allegations reveal is that corruption in Ghana has become institutionalized. This should be of grave concern to all of us. It is my hope that this concern will fuel the discussions being held today, and will help us reach a consensus, and put in place rigid measures to rid Ghana, as much and as quickly as possible, of corruption.

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In December 2009, during my first year of service to the nation as Vice President, I inaugurated the Working Group on NACAP, the National Anti-Corruption Action Plan. For two years the Working Group diligently undertook the task of studying the patterns as well as the perceptions of corruption in Ghana in order to devise the most effective and efficient strategies for combating it. They did this by, among other things, consulting with ordinary citizens and civil servants across the country, and by reviewing the various systems we have in place so as to identify the openings that exist for corruption to thrive.

The Working Group successfully coordinated the development of NACAP and in October 2011, it present the NACAP document for validation at the Second National Integrity Conference that, as Vice President, I had the privilege of opening. What NACAP offers Ghana is an initial blueprint, a practical operational mobility, in our battle against corruption. And it pleases me to announce that, finally, this past July, NACAP was unanimously adopted by Parliament.

Mr. Chairman, I have consistently stated that it is my belief that our most reliable resource and, indeed, our greatest weapon in this battle against corruption is the people of Ghana.

Words on a piece of paper- regardless of what that document are, even the Constitution- is nothing more than that: words on a piece of paper. It is people who breathe life and power into words. It is people who give them meaning and make them matter.

So, however detailed and impressive a strategy we devise with NACAP, it can only succeed with the *full* participation of the people. Please take note that I included, and emphasized, the word “full”. Full participation suggests an involvement greater than the role of watchdog. Full participation requires more than an assignation of responsibility to Government and other societal leaders to wage this battle on the people’s behalf.

What I mean when I say, “the full participation of the people,” is an understanding of roles we play in the continuation of corruption, and an acceptance of our individual responsibility in the ending of it.

In order to fully participate, we must, as a nation, start talking honestly about corruption. We must say the things that, in polite conversation, have previously been left unsaid. We can no longer afford the double-talk, the turning of a blind eye, the refusal to expose dishonest and venal colleagues. We must, as a society, move beyond false perceptions and built-in protections and start facing the facts.

You see, we tend to measure corruption only by activity. We ask, “How many instances can be counted? How many acts were committed?” These are important questions, but we shouldn’t stop there.

We must also measure corruption by the culture and atmosphere in which it is fostered, because it is only in this way that we can begin to see how, despite our stated desire to end it, our individual and collective actions and attitudes as a society, enable it to continue.

We should also be asking, “How does my silence make me complicit in the perpetuation of corruption? How do I contribute to the culture that sustains it?” Institutionalized corruption, as is often seen in developing countries, with Ghana being no exception, relies on a culture of silence and tacit acceptance; It relies on a system of cronyism, nepotism and bribery, a system that requires you to be somebody important, know somebody important or pay somebody important in order to get the basic services and the equitable treatment to which—in theory and on paper—every citizen is entitled.

A little over a week ago, the British High Commissioner, His Excellency Jon Benjamin, delivered a keynote address on the topic of “Integrity in Public Office.” It was an excellent and commendable speech, one that offered much to ponder and much to recommend. But it was Mr. Benjamin’s mention and description of a culture of corruption that, days later, continued echoing in my thoughts. This is what he said, and I quote:

“If a child grows up seeing his parents paying off policemen who stop them in their car or if that child gets used to a practice whereby a few banknotes are slipped in with homework or an exam to ensure better grades, then the rot can set in very early. A child will see such practices as normal and practice them as an adult.”

In this example, Mr. Benjamin spoke of one child. What I am asking you to consider is an entire nation of children who have been brought up in a very particular culture of corruption. I am asking you to consider whole communities of people right here in Ghana who have become accustomed to certain practices and, as such, maintain certain expectations—to the degree that they might not even associate these practices and expectations with corruption.

An example of this is the expectation we have of public servants to bear an inordinate share of the financial burdens of their family and community; to willingly influence the process in order to provide employment for family members, friends of family members, and friends of friends of family members, most of whom do not have the education, training or other necessary qualifications to hold the positions they are given.

Many of us public servants wake up in the morning, and return in the evening, to scores of people waiting outside of our homes. These are people who have woken up at dawn and traveled across town in a tro-tro in hopes of collecting monies they will use to pay school fees or hospital bills; people who have waited the entire day on the verandah or outside the gate for that five-minute window of opportunity they will have to hand over their CV, explain the desperate situation in which they find themselves and plead for help in securing a job.

The expectation is that you will help, you must help, because you are a Big Man or Big Woman; you are the President or Vice President, the Minister, MP, DCE or Mayor; you are their brother, sister, cousin, in-law, friend, neighbor, fellow parishioner, former girlfriend or boyfriend, old classmate, old co-worker.

The connections are many and, in a country like Ghana where families are large and spread across regions and tribes, they are convoluted. However these people have come to claim a connection to you, or make their way to your doorstep to register their request, the expectation is that you will help.

Any government worker will gladly tell you that their official title is far more impressive than their official salary. The reality is that the salary amount, which is a matter of public record, available for all to see, is relatively small. But that makes no difference: the requests are plenty; the pressure is huge. And if you, the public servant, do not do, if you do not give, the perception is that you are selfish; you are greedy; you are mean.

So where, then, will the money come from to meet at least some of the demand?

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If corruption were a tree, its branches would be many and its leaves would be attractive. They would be bold, wide enough to hide the few pieces of fruit that the tree bears. Only a limited number of people would have access to this tree, to its delicious, well-hidden fruit—that fruit being the handful of cedis that are extracted from someone at the airport to avert a customs check; the cedis taken from a contractor to cut corners on the approval of a building safety permit; all the by-force dashes taken for people to simply do their jobs.

When you are on the receiving end, the money is sweet. It is the sweetest fruit from the most giving of trees. Though we believe that we are being fed from this tree in actuality, the tree is feeding off of us. The more of this fruit we eat, that is to say: the more we perform or encourage or support acts of corruption, the more we nurture this tree.

The wider and stronger we make its base; the deeper and longer it can spread its roots. And these roots are what make corruption an institution; they are what plant corruption firmly into the very soil of our society.

The thing about the roots of any well-nurtured tree is that once they start to spread, they insinuate themselves into the foundation of every single structure with which it comes into contact, and threatens its stability. Each taste of sweetness from the fruit of a poison tree comes with the guarantee of sorrow. There is a reason why rules exist. Customs checks ensure, among other things, that illicit drugs and weapons do not find their way onto our streets.

Codes for building safety permits ensure that houses, offices and shops don't collapse and kill people. There is a cost attached to every act of corruption and, more often than we could even imagine, that cost is the destruction or the loss of a human life. If we're going to talk honestly about corruption, then we must address the ways in which some of the accepted societal expectations and practices place people in compromising positions.

People are fallible; they yield to temptation; they make regrettable decisions. Though these individuals make those decisions of their own accord, we cannot pretend that we, as a society, did not somehow serve as part of the stimuli. I make no excuses for public officials and others who engage in acts of corruption, but we must also realize that when we place undue pressure on individuals by making unrealistic requests and demands; when we ask people to subvert the system with their influence, we are actually initiating the process and become active participants in fuelling corruption.

Mr. Chairman, there is a saying that one should not "throw out the baby with the bath water." This saying comes to mind when I think of the damage that has been done to the reputation of institutions because of the behavior of certain individuals.

As a country, we are in no position to dismiss the efficacy of entire institutions. The fact that a few individuals out of the hundreds of people who make up the government have engaged in acts of corruption does not mean that the entire government is corrupt and unable to efficiently perform.

It, rather, means that once we have weeded out the corrupt individuals, we must examine our systems; we must strengthen the weaknesses and close the gaps that exist within it to ensure future acts of corruption cannot occur.

We, the people of Ghana, have the power to expose corruption, to demand transparency and accountability from duty bearers—and that, among others, includes Chief Executives and other Heads of Public Institutions, our elected representatives, teachers, lecturers, elders and leaders in our communities. But in so doing, we must remember that we live in a democracy and we must abide by the rule of law. There are procedures in place to investigate acts of corruption,

and to deal with the perpetrators. We cannot accuse and then deem someone guilty based solely on perception, on rumors and gossip.

We Ghanaians have always recognized and respected the honor that can be carried within a family name. For many people, that is all they have to hand down to their children and grandchildren. That is the sum total of their legacy, and we have to be careful not to destroy it with recklessness, with snap judgments based on unsubstantiated allegations.

We live in a world that has been taught to crave speed. Whether we are driving, using the Internet, queuing at a bank or listening to a religious sermon, we want it to happen faster. We want it to happen now-now-now, so we can be done with it, put it behind us and move on to the next destination or activity.

But typically, in a democracy, the wheels of justice turn rather slowly. And there is a reason for that: every citizen who stands accused is deserving of the due process of law. It is one of the rights for which we have fought, one of the rights for which people have paid the ultimate price, and it must be respected.

But trust me when I tell you that when it has been legally determined that those individuals are guilty of acts of corruption they are punished to the full extent of the law. As of July 2013, over 300 individuals were on remand for corruption and related offences.

In respect to allegations of corruption at Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Authority: There are on-going prosecutions of public officials involved, including former high-ranking officials. Service providers who breached the terms of their contracts are being held to accounts, to refund the monies to Government. But does this mean that GYEEDA, and all the positive work that it was intended to do in our communities, must now be abandoned?

The same question can, and should, be asked of the Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA.) An audit report revealed many loopholes in the financial administration procedures of the organization, and so audit recommendations were made. Based on this, I appointed a new Board and an acting Chief Executive Officer to implement those recommendations. There is no reason why SADA cannot now move forward and fulfill its mandate.

As for other recent allegations of corruption: Following audits that confirmed weaknesses in our payroll administration and specific tip-offs by a whistleblower, I requested the BNI to conduct forensic investigations into the National Service Scheme's payroll. Prosecutions are currently ongoing and remedial measures to plug the loophole are being put in place.

The new administration of the National Service Scheme has decided that all allowances for National Service persons are to be paid on the E-Zwich biometric platform to eliminate any fraud in the system.

This cleaning of the National Service payroll will extend to the larger government payroll and will also include organizations that receive government subvention. Just last week the Vice President inaugurated a Payroll Task Force. This task force, working on a prepared action plan, will ensure the cleaning of the payroll, thereby enhancing its integrity.

It will also ensure that every public servant on the payroll is genuine and has earned the remuneration they are receiving.

I am writing to all Ministers and giving them deadlines for implementation of Auditor General's report as it pertains to their various MDAs. Ministers who are supposed to be the Chairperson of their various ARICS would be required to either surcharge persons for state resources misapplied or in cases where it is recommended hand over to the Attorney General any persons found culpable of misappropriating government finances.

Failure to implement the AG's report by the deadline will attract severe sanctions on the Minister concerned.

In the interest of transparency, I would like to inform you that I have received three petitions in relation to the Commissioner of the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) which I have forwarded to Her Ladyship the Chief Justice, who I am certain is working hard to deal with the matter.

CHRAJ is an institution that is vital to this nation, and to our battle against corruption. We cannot afford to dismiss the entire institution as corrupt because of allegations of abuse of power that have been leveled against a single individual, allegations that are still being investigated.

We must base our perceptions of this institution not on gossip and rumors but on the reality of its stellar record of past performance. In 2013 we hosted a Conference of the Association of Anti-Corruption Authorities in Africa (AAACA), where the Director of CHRAJ's Anti-Corruption office was elected Chairman of that Association.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend CHRAJ for collaborating with its partners, and with my office, to organize this conference. I would also like to applaud CHRAJ for the pivotal role it has played in the adoption of NACAP. In fact, CHRAJ has been the main driver and advocate in this venture.

Mr. Chairman, in order for people to fully participate in this battle against corruption, they must have confidence in government's assurance that they are not alone, that we stand united as one nation on this matter.

To this end, we must stop politicizing our discussions of corruption. We must stop pointing fingers at political parties and figures and administrations. The people who engage in acts of

corruption are not solely affiliated with any one political party. The damage that is done to society by these acts of corruption cuts straight across political lines.

Relegating corruption to one political party or another only serves the manipulative motives of a few, and not the best interests of Ghanaians on the whole, which is why we must avoid falling prey to this pattern.

There are numerous measures being put in place to aid us in our battle against corruption. I realize that time is limited, but before bringing this address to a close, I would like to share with you just a few of them.

The implementation of NACAP will form part of my performance appraisal of Ministers, Chief Directors and CEOs of state institutions from 2015 onwards.

Following the work of the Constitutional Review Committee, a Constitutional Amendment Bill, if passed, would enhance CHRAJ's powers in the fight against corruption and also broaden the current legal definition of corruption to encompass all related offences provided under both the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption. The bill is currently pending.

Various Codes of Conduct have been launched by the Executive, the Judiciary, the Attorney General's Office, the Police Service and other public sector institutions to guide public officers in the administration of their duties.

However, the Conduct of Officers' Bill is currently before Parliament. When this Bill is enacted into law it will deal with issues of conflict of interest and strengthen the assets declaration regime.

Other Bills pending before Parliament are the Right to Information Bill, on which there has been some progress toward enactment, and the Whistleblower (Amendment) Bill. It is my hope that Parliament would do its best to pass these Bills as soon as possible.

Ghana is also signed up to the Open Government Partnership (OGP). This is a multilateral initiative whereby governments make a set commitment to promote transparency, fight corruption, empower their citizens and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. Ghana, under the auspices of this partnership, has pledged transparency and openness in all sectors of its governance.

This commitment by Ghana has, in turn, driven yet another commitment to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and to other transparency instruments, such as the Ghana Integrated Financial Management Information Systems (GIFMIS).

GIFMIS is a public financial management platform for transparency in budget implementation and financial administration, one that will surely aid in the battle against corruption, one that I

am intent on us winning. So much so that Ghana is committed to working on the more than 1,000 pledges, assurances, platforms and programs that will make our government more open and accountable.

Mr. Chairman, Transparency International recently released its Corruption Perceptions Index 2014. Quiet as it has been kept by our media Ghana's placement on this Index has improved. Out of 175 countries and territories, Ghana ranked 61st.

We also received an overall score of 48—that is out of a possible 100, with 0 being the lowest and indicating a high level of corruption, and 100 being the highest.

Transparency International explains that of the countries and territories that it judges, "Not one single country gets a perfect score and more than two-thirds score below 50." In 2013 we received a score of 46, and in 2012 we received a score of 45, indicating that our improvement, though gradual, is steady.

I am grateful for the opportunity offered me to be part of this conference. I hope that the conversations are candid. I expect that participants will find ways of building consensus on the implementation of the short-to-medium term Programmes of Action under NACAP.

In closing I would like to express my appreciation for the efforts of all Ghanaians, individuals and groups, who have shown concern about, and interest in, tackling corruption head-on. I want you to know that I share your passion.

The truth of the matter is that if we want change, we will effect change. We can win this battle against corruption. The power to do so rests in each of our hands. What we do with it is up to us.

Thank you for your kind attention.