

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, 20TH FEBRUARY, 2020, AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
ACCRA.

Mr Speaker, I am glad to be here again in this august House to perform one of the most pleasant duties on the calendar of the President of the Republic, that is to give Honourable Members and the Ghanaian people a Message on the State of the Nation. It will be the fourth of my current mandate.

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, new Chief Justice Anin Yeboah, 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 James Oppong-Boanuh, 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 Agyekum Kufuor, former First Lady, Her Excellency Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings, and the Dean and Members of the Diplomatic Corps.

The House is aware that, since my last appearance here, we have a new Chief Justice in the person of Justice Anin Yeboah, who has succeeded Justice Sophia Abena Boafoa Akuffo. His appointment has been met with broad acceptance within the legal profession and the general population, testimony to his reputation for integrity and excellence in the conduct of his judicial duties. I wish him Godspeed in the discharge of the functions of his great office, and wish Justice Sophia Akuffo a well-deserved retirement after twenty-four (24) years in high judicial office. But, knowing her, I am sure we shall hear of her again in public service of some sort. The House is equally aware that we have a new Inspector General of Police, Mr. James Oppong-Boanuh, an experienced police officer of thirty-one (31) years of service, who commands the respect of his fellow officers and the men and women of the police force and the public at large. I am confident that, as he is already demonstrating, he will be in the frontline of an impartial, politically-colour blind

administration and enforcement of the laws of the country, especially in this sensitive election year. I wish him a successful tenure of office, and wish his predecessor, Mr. David Asante Appeatu, well in his retirement.

Mr Speaker, some events in life leave an afterglow long after they have ended. I believe we can confidently say that the designation of 2019 as the "Year of Return", and the events that emanated from that decision have certainly left an afterglow that Ghana can and must cherish.

Ghana became the centre of attention in the African diaspora and, indeed, much of the world as we led the way with events of remembrance to commemorate 400 years since the first captured Africans arrived in the Americas in what became the beginning of the ignominious Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The event, being commemorated, left deep scars and remains the source of unimaginable grief for all peoples of African descent; but it provided a great opportunity for us to demonstrate our triumph over adversity.

Throughout the year, and culminating in a glorious cacophony of celebrations, Ghana was the centre of attention in much of the world. We played host to people from all over the world, young and old, men and women, black and white, joined in spectacular celebration, a joyous re-discovery of our common identity and humanity, exploring what we can do together, through political, cultural and economic engagement, to make our future brighter and better, one our future descendants will be proud of.

Year of Return

Mr Speaker, it is a matter of great pride to me that all Ghanaians embraced the Year of Return, and helped to project such a positive and endearing image of our country. My heartfelt thanks to all Ghanaians and to Members of the House, in particular, for the enthusiastic welcome that was extended to our visitors, and for making the Year of Return such a resounding success.

But we are not yet done. We are building on the foundations of the Year of Return to a new level, the next stage of our re-engagement with the African Diaspora, with the theme, "Beyond the Return".

The government is seeking to build on the success, and we are putting measures in place to take us 'Beyond the Return'. The Ministry of Tourism, under its eloquent leader, Hon. Barbara Oteng-Gyasi, Member of Parliament for Prestea Huni-Valley, and the rejuvenated Ghana Tourism Authority, under its dynamic Chief Executive, Akwasi Agyemang, are leading the charge to make our country an attractive and irresistible destination, a place of pilgrimage, a nation that everyone with a hint of African blood must visit at least once in their lifetime.

I should thank two people, in particular, who have embraced their Ghanaian heritage and have played a key role in our effort to building lasting bridges between Ghana and African-Americans: Hollywood star, Boris Kodjoe and international marketing icon, Bozoma Saint John. We are grateful to both of them for leveraging their star-power to attract thousands to the land of their fathers, and to drive a fresh narrative that says Ghana is a land of opportunity; visit, invest, make it your home. We appreciate deeply their contribution and that of many others to the success of the entire project.

Enforcing protocols

Mr. Speaker, I can testify to the renewed enthusiasm around the world for our country. My trips to Germany, France, Austria, Japan, Russia, the Caribbean, this past year, have brought tangible dividends, and there are growing investments in Ghana from companies in those countries.

The emphasis in our foreign relations remains with our immediate neighbourhood, and that means ECOWAS and the African Union, and Ghana continues to play a leading role in making these organisations active and relevant to the changing needs of our region and continent.

I cannot ignore the difficulties that currently exist in ECOWAS, especially with Nigeria, our age-old friend and largest member nation, closing its land borders for the past five months, and the instability and terrorist activity that is sadly blighting the lives of thousands in some parts of Nigeria, and shedding innocent blood in the Sahel and our neighbours to the north of our country. We are playing a positive role in the efforts being made within ECOWAS to bring this boundary impasse to an end, which will, hopefully, be sooner than later. The successful implementation of the Accra Initiative, involving the consistent collaboration and co-operation of security and intelligence heads from

Ghana and her neighbouring countries, namely Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin, Mali and Niger, continues to be our concrete contribution to the fight against terrorism in our region. Through joint security operations, such as KOUDANGOU and the ongoing Operation CONQUERED FIST, we continue to reinforce the security of our north-western, northern and north-eastern borders to guard against any infiltrations into the country. All of us have a vested interest in helping to maintain the peace, stability and security of Ghana in the current, troubling circumstances of our Region.

Mr Speaker, we never lose sight of the fact that there are many Ghanaian communities in all parts of the world, and our missions abroad have been charged anew to be alive to their needs. I am happy to report that Ghanaians in the diaspora are very much involved in whatever happens in their home country. Wherever I go, I meet with them, and they are often very well informed and insistent on accountability from government officials.

Let us never forget that the remittances from Ghanaians abroad constitute a healthy part of our economy, and I always encourage them to bring their acquired skills to invigorate the political and economic landscape.

Corona virus

Mr. Speaker, it is important that I make special mention of Ghana's relationship with the People's Republic of China, which has grown exponentially over the past few years. The dramatic economic transformation of China in the past two decades is a marvel to the world and a lesson for the rest of us in the developing world. We have entered into various agreements with China, the lead one obviously being the SinoHydro agreement, which seeks to deliver many infrastructural projects.

Mr Speaker, today, China is unfortunately battling an outbreak of the deadly Covid-19 virus. We sympathize with the people of China at this time of great trouble. I have written to President Xi Jinping to convey to the government and the people of China the solidarity and sympathy of the compassionate people of Ghana. We trust that, with the tough decisions being implemented to curb the spread of the virus, this

nightmare will be over, and, soon, they will recover from its devastating social and economic impact.

There is a sizeable Ghanaian community in China and our government, through our Embassy, has been working with the Chinese authorities to find the best way to deal with the situation.

The Ghanaian community includes four thousand, seven hundred and sixty (4,760) students, out of which three hundred (300) are studying in Hubei Province and two hundred (200) in the city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak. We have a difficult and delicate situation on our hands, Mr Speaker, and it does not benefit anybody to try to score points by introducing ill-judged politics into this ongoing medical conundrum and humanitarian tragedy.

Most of these students are on Chinese government scholarships, and, since the crisis started, the Chinese government has done its best to keep them supplied with food and other logistics. The Ghana government, through its Mission, also supplies logistics, and the Embassy has given, so far, five hundred United States dollars (US\$500) to each student.

However, we know that no amount of logistics will make up for the extreme stress and trauma that these young people are going through, and I entreat members of this Honourable House to set an example by helping to pour oil over troubled waters, instead of instigating tension and spreading fear and panic among the young people. The government is in constant touch with experts on the subject, who advise that the basic principle of public health is to confine the disease to the area of its origin, but we have not ruled out the option of evacuating the students from Wuhan, if that becomes necessary. We have put in place measures to ensure that their evacuation back into Ghana, if it happens, does not lead to the dissemination of fear and panic amongst the general population.

Mr Speaker, I have spent time talking about how well we are doing on the international scene, and the many plaudits that are showered on Ghana wherever I go. But the test of how well our country is doing can, and should, be measured by how Ghanaians themselves feel about their situation.

Ten days ago, our Vice President, and Chairman of the Economic Management Team, Alhaji Dr Mahamudu Bawumia, made a presentation at a Town Hall meeting in Kumasi in which he gave a detailed and comprehensive account of the performance of the economy under three years of management by an NPP government, led by me. He went to great lengths to identify the promises that had been made in the 2016 Manifesto that we took to the country. This document spelt the agreement between the elected government and the people of Ghana.

I do not intend to go through all over again the meticulous accounting that was done in Kumasi ten (10) days ago. It is enough to say that it being Dr Bawumia, everything he said was backed by data and his customary fact-checking. He ended by asserting that seventy-eight percent (78%) of the promises we solemnly made to the people of Ghana have been or are in the process of being fulfilled. There has, so far, been no factual challenge to his compelling testimony.

The Economy

Mr. Speaker, in three years we have reduced inflation to its lowest level (7.8% in January 2020) since 1992. For the first time in over forty (40) years, we have had a fiscal deficit below five percent (5%) of GDP for three years in a row. For the first time in over twenty (20) years, the balance of trade (that is the difference between our exports and imports) has been in surplus for three (3) consecutive years. Our current account deficit is shrinking, interest rates are declining, and the average annual rate of depreciation of the cedi is at its lowest for any first term government in the Fourth Republic. Our economic growth has rebounded to place Ghana among the fastest growing economies in the world for three years in a row at an annual average of 7%, up from 3.4% in 2016, the lowest in nearly three decades. The international investor community has recognised this development, resulting in Ghana, today, being the largest recipient of foreign direct investment in West Africa. The sovereign credit ratings agencies have upgraded our ratings, and also improved the outlook for this year, notwithstanding the fact that it is an election year. This is a massive vote of confidence in the current management of the economy, as best illustrated by Ghana's successful issue of the longest-dated Eurobond ever issued by a sub-Saharan African country, with investors placing fifteen billion United States dollars (\$15 billion) of orders for Ghana's forty-one (41) year Eurobond. The seven (7) year Bond attracted the lowest coupon rates

ever for Ghana at six point three-seven-five percent (6.375%), compared with the nine point two-five percent (9.25%) Ghana had to pay for a similar Eurobond issue in 2016. No wonder Bloomberg, the reputable global financial media house, earlier this week, highlighted Ghana as the top candidate for an economic leap in Africa. This expression of confidence is important because it will lead to enhanced investments in our economy, and the accompanying greater numbers of jobs.

Financial sector clean up

We inherited a collapsing financial sector that has led to failing banks, and considerable agony to many people. The government is having to conjure thirteen billion cedis (GH¢13 billion) to pay the 4.6 million affected customers of the banks.

This is money that we can ill-afford, and which would have gone to fund the many things that our communities are crying for. Properly utilised, thirteen billion Ghana cedis would work wonders with our perennial infrastructure deficit. But, we did think long and hard about paying all the customers of the failed banks, and we believe we made the right decision. I would like to repeat that all depositors of the savings and loans and microfinance institutions, including DKM which collapsed in 2015, will receive 100% of their deposits, too, once the validation exercise is concluded, and I am informed that the Receiver of the Savings and Loans and Microfinance institutions will begin, on Monday, 24th February, making payments to their customers, these monies, totaling five billion cedis, being in addition to the thirteen billion cedis being paid to the customers of the failed banks.

We hope that lessons have been learnt, and this will serve as a healthy caution to those who are offered unrealistic interest rates on deposits. I do not think it will be possible to repeat this grand pay-up in another lifetime. I want to assure Ghanaians that we are going to hold those who have been responsible for these failures of financial institutions (the supervisors and management of these institutions) accountable, a process which has already started. We expect that those whose job it is to supervise the banks and other financial institutions will do their jobs honestly and competently.

I am very encouraged by the many corporate governance measures that have already been put in place by the Bank of Ghana, under the strong leadership of Governor Ernest Addison, to mitigate such bank failures in the future. Thanks to the banking sector clean-up, today I am happy to say that Ghana's weak banking sector that we inherited is now well-capitalised, better managed, sound and liquid and the banks are now increasing their lending to the private sector to help propel the transformation of the economy Beyond Aid.

Dagbon Peace

Mr Speaker, a year ago, I started my speech here in Parliament with a reference to the happy events in Dagbon, and my presence at the enskinment of the new Ya-Naa Mahama Abukari II. I am glad to report that, about a month ago, the now-firmly in place Ya-Naa paid a historic visit to Jubilee House. I do not think Jubilee House has ever witnessed such scenes. It would be fair to say that the Ya-Naa and his entourage certainly shook up the place, and nobody would be forgetting that dramatic, colourful visit in a hurry.

Dagbon is gradually regaining her self-confidence, and I hope the House will join me in wishing that ancient kingdom the goodwill, patience and tolerance her elders, sons and daughters need to continue the healing process, and grow from strength to strength.

Mr Speaker, the peace, that currently prevails in Dagbon, is required for progress and development throughout the country. We have spent a lot of money to ensure that the security agencies, that are charged with maintaining law and order and keeping us safe, are well resourced to enable them perform their duties. Police numbers have been increased and will be increased further until we meet the recommended ratio.

Equipping the security forces

The police have been provided with more vehicles and equipment than they have ever had, including over six hundred (600) vehicles and three (3) incoming helicopters. There are now more opportunities for police officers to undergo training on the job to make them better prepared for work in our communities and keep us safe. We are building upon and improving the capacity of the cybercrime unit to confront and neutralise the criminal and dark underbelly of modern technology and the cyber-

world. The government will continue to work with the management of the police service to ensure that there is proper and adequate training in modern policing methods and the equipping of the service to enable them deal with crime.

Mr Speaker, Government is committed to improving the conditions of service of all security personnel, including the police. But, nevertheless, I think it is my duty also to point out that public perception of the police continues not to be the best, and they must make a comprehensive effort to earn the confidence of the public. We cannot run a country of law and order without a well-trained and accomplished police service, that has the respect and confidence of the people. I acknowledge the work they do, but I urge them to work harder on their reputation.

Mr Speaker, I am happy to report that the equipping and rehabilitation effort is not only in the police service, but also in all the other services as well. I must make mention of the Fire Service and the Prison Service where the numbers have been increased with fresh recruitment. There are positive things happening in the Prison Service with opportunities being made available for inmates to acquire skills.

I note, in particular, with a lot of satisfaction, that, this past year, three hundred and seventy-six (376) prison inmates passed various exams in the National Vocational and Technical Institutes, Junior High Schools and Senior High Schools.

Mr Speaker, the Ghana Armed Forces continue to perform creditably in discharging their duty of defending the territorial integrity of the country. The government has retooled and equipped them to keep them in the desired state of readiness. When the government amended L.I 1332, which extended the run-out date from twenty (25) years to thirty (30) years for the 'Other Ranks', it led to the creation of new ranks within the structures of the Armed forces, and to a subsequent rationalisation of wages and salaries for all ranks within the Forces.

Government is tackling the long-standing housing problem that has faced our Armed Forces. Over five hundred million cedis (GH¢500 million) is being invested in housing projects of varying sizes for the men and women of the Armed Forces, and in refurbishing the Military Academy and Training Schools in Teshie.

Our soldiers have been active along the northern borders to protect our country and its people since the eruption of terrorist activities in Burkina Faso. They have also been working with the police since July 2017 in Operation Vanguard, which was set up to deal with the activities of illegal miners.

Galamsey

Mr Speaker, the mention of Operation Vanguard would seem to be the appropriate time to deal with the subject of galamsey, the popular name that has been coined for illegal mining. When we came into office in January 2017, galamsey activities were rampant in many parts of our country. Our lands, forests and river bodies were being systematically degraded and polluted without any care. And this had been the case for several years. Indeed, the previous government had given up the fight against galamsey. We determined that this was an intolerable situation, and we owed it to generations yet unborn, to tackle the problem and save our environment.

I was very much aware that the lure of gold, once it takes hold, drives away all rationality. That is not a Ghanaian characteristic, it is a human characteristic that has been displayed all over the world, throughout the ages. I was, therefore, not under any illusions about the size and scope of the problem we were taking on.

But, I was cheered by the support from a large part of the population that also recognised the danger posed by the degradation of our lands and water bodies, and the needless deaths of young people, who were being buried alive in makeshift mining pits. I welcomed, in particular, the Media Coalition, which was formed in July 2017, that lent its support to the fight against galamsey.

As I have said on countless occasions, the battle we launched was not against mining, it would be unrealistic for anyone to suggest that there should be no mining in Ghana. The Almighty, having blessed us with all these precious minerals, must surely be in agreement that we would find ways to use them to develop our country, and for the benefit of our communities.

However, taking the minerals out should not lead to the destruction of our water bodies and forests, or endanger the sustainable existence of

our country. What is more, it was obvious to all that the small-scale mining, that had always taken place in our communities, had been transformed into something unrecognisable in our history by the introduction of the monster machinery that dug up riverbeds and turned serene streams into ugly, toxic, muddy, frothy ponds. It was no longer small-scale mining, and it certainly was no longer local community mining, when we saw the influx of foreigners into the most rural, isolated and densest of forests. It was no longer local community mining when rivers, hitherto, considered as sacred, were being abused and polluted.

We started with the banning of all small-scale mining, and, after about a year of the campaign, we made some progress as some rivers showed signs of coming back to life. The University of Mines and Technology at Tarkwa took on the role of training local people in sustainable mining and by the time the ban on all small-scale mining was lifted last year, about four thousand (4,000) had received the training.

This Honourable House also did its part by amending the Mining Act to raise the penalties for illegal mining, and prohibiting foreign nationals from participating in any way in small-scale mining. The nation is grateful for the intervention of Parliament.

Mr Speaker, the threat posed to the future of our country by galamsey is grave, and we cannot shirk our responsibilities in dealing with it. I am appealing to the Media Coalition not be daunted by the difficulties in the fight against galamsey. Government will not weaken its stance, and welcomes the support of the Media Coalition.

The Inter-Ministerial Committee Against Illegal Mining has been working hard, and has had some successes. Under the auspices of this Committee, the Ministry of Local Government has formulated, and is implementing, the Alternative Livelihood Programme in thirty-five (35) severely affected "galamsey" Districts across the country.

Last year, five hundred (500) youth, mainly engaged in illegal mining, were trained and graduated in vocational and technical skills from Community Development Vocational and Technical Institutions. They have been provided with start-up tools and equipment. An additional six hundred and seven (607) youth are currently undergoing similar training, two hundred and forty (240) of whom are in the Community

Development Institutions, whilst three hundred and sixty-seven (367) are attached to Master Craftsmen through apprenticeship at the community level.

Operation Vanguard has been largely successful, even though problems still remain. Mining with impunity on water bodies and in forest reserves has declined. More than four thousand (4,000) miners have received training in sustainable mining. The number of individuals, dying in collapsed mining tunnels and pits in the few unauthorized locations left, has reduced by more than ninety percent (90%). Operation Vanguard has been particularly effective in helping to restore the order which has permitted the reopening of the famous Obuasi mine of AngloGold Ashanti.

The Community Mining Programme has been well received by the population, and young men and women, who did not have the resources to acquire concessions and excavators and other mining inputs, and, therefore, had to do 'galamsey', have moved into legal community mining.

Now, more than twenty-thousand (20,000) individuals are earning their incomes legitimately in the community mines in Akrofuom, Atwima Nwabiagya, Atwima Mponua, Adansi North, Amansie Central, Wassa Amenfi East and Wa East Districts. Since the introduction of the Community Mining Programme, there have been no deaths due to the collapse of tunnels and pits.

The Inter-Ministerial Committee, along with Operation Vanguard, were determined to disrupt galamsey activities, by confiscating equipment that were employed in these activities. In this regard, 12,000 "changfan" machines that go on the river and scoop up the riverbed were seized and destroyed on site. Some excavators were also seized, and a number of them have gone missing. The Police have arrested and charged some of the alleged culprits, and investigations are ongoing. No one involved will be shielded, no matter what their positions or political colours are.

Fighting corruption

Mr. Speaker, we have made significant strides over the last three years in our fight against corruption, despite the scepticism of people with questionable records. We have strengthened the legal framework to fight corruption, with the help of this House, by passing into law the

Witness Protection Act, 2018 (Act 959), the Office of the Special Prosecutor Act, 2018 (Act 959), the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2019 (Act 989), and the Companies Act, 2019, (Act 992), which provides a framework for enacting a beneficial ownership register.

Government has increased budgetary allocations to all the accountability institutions of State, including the Parliament of Ghana, the Judiciary, CHRAJ, EOCO, the Office of the Attorney-General and Ministry of Justice, the Auditor General, the Office of the Special Prosecutor and the Ghana Police Service with annual increases between 25% and 34% between 2017 and 2019.

We have also implemented a change from the opaque allocation of Ghana's oil blocks to a more transparent allocation process, and advisedly so. The opaque period, 2013 to 2016, saw, according to the Ministry of Energy, the signature of thirteen (13) petroleum agreements, from which fourteen (14) wells were to be drilled. Not a single well was drilled. In contrast, in my time, over the last three (3) years, there have been six (6) drilling campaigns on three (3) different blocks, with others on the way. We will drill more and find more oil.

Some forty or more (40) high profile personalities are currently before the courts on various corruption charges and more are in the pipeline. I will like to repeat that if evidence of corruption is presented, no one will be spared, regardless of position or political affiliation. No one is above the law. That is the true meaning of equality before the law.

Mr. Speaker, as part of our strategy to modernize the economy, deliver government services efficiently, and curb corruption, Government has over the last three years embarked on a major program of digitization of the economy with significant success. As at the end of last week, 9.2 million people have been registered for the National ID card, the Ghana card. Before the end of this year, Ghana will have a fully working national ID system, which will be a game-changer for our nation.

Infrastructure

Mr Speaker, we are also providing infrastructure to many Zongo communities across the country, through the Zongo Development Fund.

Mr Speaker, we are seeing an improvement in the quality of our nation's sanitation, even though we still have a lot more to do. According to the Northern Regional Environmental Health Unit, in the three Northern Regions, (Savannah, North East and Northern), the number of Open Defaecation Free Communities (ODF) has increased from five percent (5%) as at June 2016 to some fifty-eight (58%) as at July 2019. The latest data from the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources shows that ODF communities in Ghana as a whole have increased from four hundred and ten (410) in 2016 to over five thousand (5,000) communities. Now, that is progress, and it did not just happen, it took hard work, commitment and the provision of infrastructure. In fulfilment of our manifesto commitment of "toilets for all", we have built thirteen thousand, eight hundred (13,800) toilets, which is largely responsible for this development. Mr Speaker, we have not stopped building toilets, we will build more.

Food and agriculture

Mr Speaker, another good example of deliberate, well-thought out policy, executed through hard work and commitment, that is generating dividends, is what we have done about food and agriculture in the past three (3) years.

It bears repeating that agriculture was very much in the doldrums when we came into office, with a growth rate of 2.9%. We introduced the programme for Planting for Food and Jobs, and set about to make agriculture an attractive profession. We invested resources, expertise and time, and the results have been impressive and rewarding. Growth rate in 2017 was 6.1%, and this increased to 6.4% last year.

Increased production and high yields of some foodstuffs like maize, rice, sorghum, groundnuts, soyabean, cowpea, cassava and plantain have led to a decrease in the wholesale prices in market centers in major food producing areas. Furthermore, we are no longer importers of maize, we are reducing our dependence on rice imports, and are now, in effect, net exporters of foodstuffs. Food prices are at their lowest in decades.

Mr Speaker, I must provide some examples of what I mean by things not just occurring by happenstance, but by deliberate and meticulous planning and competent execution. We recruited some two thousand, seven hundred (2,700) agricultural extension agents to give practical

expertise on the farms. We are not yet at the United Nations recommended ratio of one extension officer to five hundred (1:500) farmers, but we are working to get there, and it is definitely a vast improvement on the decimated department we met on the assumption of office. With the support of Canada, three hundred (300) vehicles and three thousand (3,000) motorbikes have been deployed around the country for ease of movement for those tasked to help the farmers.

Once the foodstuffs are produced, we do not leave it to chance and risk not being able to sell and, thereby, discourage the farmers. The National Food and Buffer Stock Company (NAFCO) has been revitalised to enhance agricultural marketing, and improve access to market. NAFCO is promoting institutional procurement of produce and sales to schools and hospitals.

Mr Speaker, I am pleased to inform you that the Commodities Exchange in Ghana, which is fully operational, is promoting high productivity, price stability, increased exports, and reduced imports of commodities. Trading operations, through an electronic trading platform, commenced in November 2018.

To increase storage capacity, eighty (80) warehouses, each of a size of one thousand metric tonnes, are being built around the country. Thirty-five (35) have been completed by the Ministry of Special Development Initiatives, and thirteen (13) by the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture will complete the remaining seventeen (17) soon, and the Special Development Initiatives Ministry will complete another ten (10) by June. In other words, Mr. Speaker, every part of the value chain is planned and accounted for.

The diversification of the scheme ensures that there would be something to interest a wide variety of people. Thus, it is not only foodstuffs that are on offer; the Planting for Export and Rural Development (PERD) module promotes the following tree crops: cashew, coffee, coconut, oil palm, mango, rubber and shea. Parliament has contributed to the process of agricultural transformation by the establishment of the Tree Crop Development Authority, which is going to be responsible for husbanding the industries of these tree crops into full maturity, and expand by seven-fold our earnings from agriculture. The Rearing for Food and Jobs (RFJ) programme is developing a competitive and more efficient livestock industry that will increase domestic meat production

and reduce importation of livestock. Two hundred and sixty-five (265) small earth dams have been completed under the 1-Village-1-Dam initiative. More will be done this year.

At the heart of all these efforts is the determination to make agriculture an attractive business to young, educated Ghanaians, and this is why modernisation, mechanisation and the use of technology are all part of the scheme.

Digital and internet maps of soil fertility status in the Northern Savannah Ecological Zone are being made available to facilitate informed decision making on fertilizer formulation and application. If any more proof were needed that, under this government, agriculture is a high-tech undertaking, Mr Speaker, an electronic platform has been established to capture and monitor the activities of participating farmers. As at December 2019, five hundred thousand (500,000) farmers had been biometrically registered.

Fishing Industry

Mr Speaker, it gives me great joy to be able to tell this House that modernisation is finally coming to the fishing industry as well. New ways of doing things are being accepted and our fisherfolk are now ready to take a leap into scientific and sustainable methods of fishing. For two consecutive years now, our fisherfolk have accepted a close season, and allowed fishes to spawn without disturbance in our waters. Constructions of the ten (10) long promised, much publicised landing sites, in Senya Beraku, Elmina, Moree, Mumford, Winneba, Gomoa Fetteh, Dixcove, Axim, Teshie and Keta, have finally started. Axim, Dixcove, Senya Beraku and Gomoa Fetteh will be completed by the end of this year, with the remainder being completed early next year. Construction of the Jamestown Harbour will commence in March, following the completion of technical work.

Business development

Mr Speaker, I am looking forward to the Business Resource Centres being built, helping the country to unearth some exciting, young entrepreneurs. Thirty-seven (37) of them have been completed. These centres are one-stop enterprise support centres that provide full range of business development services, investment facilitation and

information services to entrepreneurs, and business enterprises at the district level. On Monday, I was very pleased to be at Kadjebi, in the Oti Region, to commission one (1) of the thirty-seven (37) BRCs that have been completed around the country. In November last year, I commissioned another one at Effiduase Asokore, in the Ashanti Region. The BRCs are all being equipped with modern IT infrastructure, and networked through a virtual private network, to facilitate efficient delivery of their operations. We have built thirty-seven (37), we are building thirty (30) more.

The young people that I met during the Presidential Pitch programme, for example, give me a lot of hope, and strike me as having the potential to benefit from the BRCs, the National Entrepreneurship and Innovations Plan, and take on the world.

Mr Speaker, the government is aggressively pursuing its plans for industrial transformation. Whilst the Business Development Ministry works on bringing out entrepreneurial skills and encouraging young people to spot business opportunities, we are paying greater attention to making Ghana an easy place to do business and set up industries.

AfCFTA

Having won the bid to host the Headquarters of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in Accra, the Government has provided a permanent office building to host the Secretariat, and with the appointment of the Secretary-General in Addis Ababa two weeks ago, at the recent AU Summit, the office will become operational by the end of next month. We extend our warm congratulations to the first Secretary-General, Wamkele Mene, the young South African, and assure him that we will give him our fullest co-operation to ensure he succeeds.

Mr. Speaker, we launched the Ghana Automotive Development Policy in August last year, and it has so far attracted investments and commercial interests from some very big players, including Toyota, Volkswagen, Nissan, Renault, Hyundai, Sinotruk and Suzuki. VW is building its plant at the North Industrial Area in Accra, and is due to start production by the end of April. Sinotruk has begun assembling its trucks. Toyota is scheduled to start the assembly of vehicles in Tema in the last quarter of this year. We have high hopes for this new industry, which has come to join our own Kantanka.

Bauxite extraction

Mr. Speaker, we are determined, at long last, to exploit our large bauxite, manganese and iron ore deposits, which will enable us to establish an integrated bauxite and aluminium industry, and an iron and steel industry. The Ghana Integrated Bauxite and Aluminum Development Corporation and the Ghana Integrated Iron and Steel Corporation have been established by law as the vehicles for this exploitation. The processes are underway for the selection, this year, of joint venture partners for the development of the full value chain of these two multi-billion-dollar industries, which will give a tremendous boost to Ghanaian industrialisation.

Industrialisation and energy

Mr. Speaker, all our best laid plans for industrialization would come to naught unless we have a reliable and reasonably priced energy source. It probably says something about the progress we have made that, in discussing the state of our nation, it takes a while even to get into our power supply matters. It gives me great pleasure to be able to say that we have overcome the DUMSOR menace. But, unfortunately, I cannot say that we have resolved all our energy problems. It is still work in progress. Further, the five years of energy crisis led to the signing of what can only be described as usurious contracts that have landed our country with a huge financial burden. The take or pay contracts resulted in the country being saddled with expensive excess power, and our having to pay nearly one billion United States dollars, in 2018 and 2019, for power we did not need. We are working to find a way out to ensure reliable power supply at a cost that makes us competitive in the Region.

In the meantime, the industrialisation flagship project, 1-District-1-Factory, is progressing and beginning to show dividends. A total of one hundred and eighty-one (181) projects, spread across the one hundred and twelve (112) districts, are currently at various stages of implementation under the programme. Fifty-eight (58) companies already in operation; twenty-six (26) projects currently under construction; fifty-eight (58) AfDB small-scale projects ready for sod cutting in the early part of this year; and twenty-six (26) pipeline projects are ready to commence implementation by the 1st quarter of this year. EXIM Bank, last month, signed a one hundred million United

States dollar facility with Credit Suisse to help complete, this year, twenty (20) of the export-related factories. It is envisaged that the 1D1F initiative will generate a total of two hundred and twenty-eight thousand, eight hundred and sixty-six (228,866) direct and indirect jobs. Even though the latest Ghana Living Standards Survey has recorded a drop in unemployment from 11.9% in 2015 to 7.3% in 2019, we still need to do more to create more jobs with urgency.

Struggling, existing businesses are also being revived and expanded under the 1D1F scheme. There is nothing contrary to the philosophy that underpins 1D1F if an already existing enterprise is helped to expand and employ more people.

Education

Mr. Speaker, all our plans, all our hopes, all our expectations for a brighter tomorrow will only come to fruition if we can guarantee an educated and skilled workforce. A look at the national budget gives a clear indication of where our priority lies and it is with education.

The Pre-Tertiary Education Bill, currently before Parliament, defines the priorities. Basic education has been redefined to include Senior High School, and this covers vocational, agricultural and technical schools. The emphasis is aggressively to promote Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education across all levels of the education system. I am aware that some of the Teacher Unions have concerns over the proposed legislation. I would like to add my voice to that of Parliament in encouraging the Unions to deepen their engagement with the Ministry of Education in order to find a consensus that will enable the Bill to go forward in peace.

Mr Speaker, it was a Manifesto commitment to leverage technology to popularise the teaching and learning of Mathematics. It was with an eye to the future that we decided to demystify mathematics, and make Ghana a mathematics-friendly country. We need more engineering and technically minded people to be able to transform the economy. I am glad to report that Ghana's teachers are supportive of the many changes that are being introduced to make these hopes a reality. Yes, the first cohort of Free SHS students are now getting ready to take their West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination, and we look forward to them doing well.

Despite the continuing hostility of a few about the merits of the Free Senior High School policy, I am glad to note that it has been widely accepted by the overwhelming majority of Ghanaians. Yes, we still have some difficulties with infrastructure deficits, which are being vigorously addressed with the construction of nine hundred and sixty two (962) facilities – dormitories, dining halls, assembly halls and classroom blocks, together with the provision of mono desks and beds – but the argument about the importance of ensuring that all Ghana’s children get a secondary school education is irresistible.

In the best of worlds, the conversation should move on to the fastest way to provide laboratories and workshops, to make all Ghana’s children ICT competent. The conversation should move on to how quickly we can transform our children into technically-minded and mathematics loving students.

This Government is trying to move the conversation to Technical, Vocational and Education Training (TVET) becoming the instinctive choice for children at school. We are moving the conversation to ensuring that when an institution is designated as a technical institution, it delivers technical courses. And, just in case I need to remind anyone, TVET has always been part of Free SHS, or, if you prefer, call it Free TVET.

I am well aware that we need a happy and contented group of teachers to ensure that the teaching and learning environment is happy and safe for our children. We have restored the teacher trainee allowances, employed sixty-seven thousand (67,000) teachers, paid tier-2 pension funds of teachers, cleared the three-year backlog of non-promotion of teachers, abandoned the three-month pay policy we inherited for newly-recruited teachers and cleared 92% of the legacy arrears, we have restored the research and book allowances that were cancelled, and we have agreed to grant teachers a professional allowance. The new promotion policy for teachers, announced some two weeks ago, has been well received by teachers. This government is determined to restore dignity to the teaching profession. We want the teachers to accept that they hold our destinies in their hands.

I am happy to note that sporting activities are finding their way back into the regular school curriculum. I am told that inter-schools sporting

activities are once again attaining the keen competitive edge that those of us of a certain age remember.

Youth and Sports

Mr. Speaker, ten (10) Youth and Sports Centres of Excellence, are being constructed across ten regions of the country at Wa, Dormaa, Dunkwa-on-Offin, Ho, Koforidua, Nyinahin, Yendi, Navrongo, Axim and Kaneshie to harness and develop the entrepreneurial abilities and sporting talents of the youth. All ten (10) will be completed this year, and the six (6) newly created regions will also be provided with the same facilities from this year. Each centre will have a counselling centre (for entrepreneurship development), a conference centre, an ICT centre, a restaurant, hostel facility and offices, a FIFA standard football pitch, an 8-lane athletic track, tennis courts, multi-purpose courts for basketball, handball, tennis, volleyball and other sporting disciplines, and a gymnasium.

We are making sure there will be room for the future Alice Anums, Mike Aheys, Baba Yaras to develop their skills. We want to make sure that when children turn on the television to watch sporting programmes, they will be able to find, on the field and tracks, Ghanaians competing at the highest levels.

It was with considerable reluctance that Government had to intervene in the administration of football, when we decided to dissolve the old GFA because of the bribery and corruption that engulfed its operation. Government worked with FIFA, established the Normalisation Committee, and helped bring a new GFA into being. I am happy to note that football, the passion of the nation, has returned to full normalcy, following the election of a new President of the Ghana Football Association (GFA), Mr. Kurt Okraku. I congratulate him on his election. The Ghana Premier League has started, and let us help **"Bring Back the Love"**.

Census

Mr. Speaker, this year we are going to conduct a national census, and it is incumbent on every citizen to co-operate with the Ghana Statistical Service to enable the Service produce an accurate census and data for our effective socio-economic planning.

Mr. Speaker, we never lose sight of the fact that there are always some people who might not be able to run life's race at the same frenetic pace as the majority of people. It is the responsibility of government always to provide the safety net that would ensure that the poor and vulnerable are not excluded from the development agenda.

We will continue to improve and expand social protection interventions to cover those who need them. It is critical that the social protection interventions are targeted at those who genuinely need them, and who would use them to help lift themselves out of poverty.

Mr. Speaker, the Ghana National Household Registry (GNHR), in collaboration with the Ghana Statistical Service, is collecting data on all extremely poor households in the country through inter-institutional coordination, to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in social protection spending, and eliminate duplication in targeting and selection of beneficiaries for social protection programmes.

Mr Speaker, let me give an example of the type of help. For the first time in the country's history, a dedicated fund of five million cedis (GH¢5 million) to support women entrepreneurs with disability has been established.

The fund, known as Presidential Empowerment for Women Entrepreneurs with Disability, is to provide financial support to one thousand (1,000) women entrepreneurs with disability in two years, either to establish or scale-up their businesses. So far, eight hundred and fifty (850) women entrepreneurs with disability across the country have benefitted from the fund, which is fifty percent (50%) grant and fifty percent (50%) loan without interest. The support has enabled the women to expand their businesses, and to create one hundred and eighty (180) direct jobs and many more indirect jobs.

The Presidential Empowerment for Women Entrepreneurs with Disability does not only help deliver a manifesto commitment, it is also in fulfilment of the SDG goals five (5), eight (8) and ten (10), which aim to ensure economic inclusion of women, and to harness their talents and capabilities for national development.

Mr Speaker, we have begun the process of amending the Disability Act, Act 715, to comply with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and, hopefully, this House will pass it before the end of the year. As part of the Disability Inclusive Policy of Government, all Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies have representations of Persons with Disabilities to enable them partake in local level governance.

Health

Mr Speaker, the general health of the people is an important ingredient in making rapid development. Sixty-five thousand (65,000) new healthcare personnel, from 2017 to date, have been recruited. The National Health Insurance Scheme is operating more adequately, and is enjoying the confidence of the increasing numbers of its users, with the number of active members up from 10.6 million in 2016 to 12.3 million at the end of 2019. I remember last year, I urged Ghanaians to renew their NHIS membership by dialling star nine two nine hash (*929#) on any mobile phone network. I am glad it has had an impact, as five million people renewed their NHIS membership through the mobile renewal service platform in 2019.

As the nation has made progress in eradicating the communicable diseases that used to be the main causes of mortality, we are in danger of falling into the lifestyle disease trap. Too many of us are overweight, and obesity is an increasing problem, even among young people. The foods we eat, the mode of cooking, and the lack of exercise are all now having a great impression on our health. It is time we all learn to take responsibility for our individual health, and accept that our health is very much determined by our lifestyle.

Roads, Rail and Transport

Mr. Speaker, one big problem we have is how we move people and goods from place to place. I am glad to report that we are making significant and verifiable progress in the railways sector. We can now take for granted and as part of the normal transportation routes, the rehabilitation of some of the old narrow-gauge lines that have been pressed back into service. The Tema to Accra line has been operational for two years, and the Accra to Nsawam line would soon be. The

Takoradi to Tarkwa line was inaugurated few weeks ago, and is proving to be very popular and being enthusiastically patronised.

Mr. Speaker, there are other suburban lines that will soon be brought into our everyday lives. Those are exciting, of course, but the big one remains the Tema to Ouagadougou, or, to put it less dramatically, the Accra to Paga line. What started as the Tema to Paga railway line has become the Ghana to Burkina Railway Interconnectivity Project. Approximately eight hundred (800) kilometers of this rail line will be in Ghana, and two hundred (200) kilometers in Burkina Faso.

Mr Speaker, Cabinet has approved the final route for this line. The approximately one hundred (100) kilometre, Tema to Akwamu Mkapadan line, is the first section of the Tema to Ouagadougou rail line. At the environs of Juapong, a branch line from Tema to Mpakadan will continue through Hohoe, Nkwanta, Dambai, Yendi, Tamale, Walewale, Nalerigu, Sheini, Bolgatanga and then to Paga as the remaining seven hundred (700) kilometers of the Tema to Ouagadougou Railway line.

Mr Speaker, the consultants of the project have submitted their final report, and the two Governments have begun the final stage of procurement for the strategic investor. I am confident that, this year, the strategic investor will be chosen. The preparation for construction has already commenced with the choice of the final route, and the acquisition of land, the right of way, will start immediately.

The contractors have assured the government that the Tema to Mpakadan line, which includes a three hundred (300) metre rail bridge over the Volta River, will be completed in August. Those who travel along the Accra to Akosombo route would testify that this is a reality, as we can all see the work being done. I hope to travel on that line in August. We can safely say that the rail line journey to Paga has begun.

Work is going on to develop the railway network in other parts of the country. There will be activity on the Eastern Line this year, and construction will commence on the Kumasi to Nyinahin via Aduadin rail line. In addition to the inter-city and regional railway lines, Government is committed to developing suburban rail lines and inner-city light rail to ease the oppressive traffic situation within our cities.

What is popularly referred to as the Western Line is receiving attention. The Kojokrom to Manso section, approximately twenty-two (22) kilometre section of the line, with a three hundred and fifty (350) metre viaduct, is being developed.

To speed up the development of the line, the contractor has been asked to develop a new standard gauge line within the Port of Takoradi, to convert the Takoradi to Kojokrom narrow gauge line into a standard gauge line, and also to continue the development of the new standard gauge line from Manso to Huni Valley.

The Kumasi section of the Western Line will also receive attention this year, since government has decided to develop the Western Line from Takoradi towards Kumasi and from Kumasi towards Takoradi. Mr Speaker, I am happy to announce that development of the Kumasi to Aduabin section of the Western Line will commence this year.

Mr. Speaker, just in case there is someone here who might have missed it, I would like to announce and inform the House that, this year, the year of Our Lord 2020, has been declared the Year of Roads.

Mr Speaker, when we declared last year, 2019, as the "Year of Return", it was not because Africans in the diaspora had not been visiting Ghana throughout the years to reconnect with their past. We wanted to make a special year of it, we wanted to draw attention to it and inform the whole world we considered it important. That is the idea of the Year of Roads.

There are legitimate cases to be made for emphasis to be placed on any of the many deficits in our infrastructure. This year, this government is saying we are putting the emphasis on roads.

Gradually, the backlog of debts owed to contractors is being cleared, and many of them are able to go back to the jobs to finish them.

A list of some critical roads has been drawn up and work has started on them. Some of the names of the roads on this list have featured repeatedly in various speeches before this House in the past thirty years. Some of them have even featured on lists of roads, that have been claimed to have been built, but that have turned out to have been artists' impressions. Some of the roads on the list have, indeed, been

said to have been built by so-called reputable contractors, but they have not survived two rainy seasons.

Mr. Speaker, I speak for all of us in this House, when I say the most frequent and most passionate complaints we get from our constituents are about roads.

I, therefore, expect that everyone will take an interest in the works that are being done and going to be done. Let us all take an interest and ensure that we get value for money. Never again should it be that a political party or government be allowed to claim to have built a road, a school, or a hospital when they have not done so. No longer should it be permissible that project supervisors and consultants sign off on buildings and roads for contractors to be paid for shoddy work or work not done.

We live in these communities where these fake projects are said to have been undertaken, and we should each make it our business to ensure that the work is what it claims to be, and contractors get paid for work they have, indeed, done. The Ministry has published the list of critical roads that the government is undertaking to do, and I shall not be reciting them here. I am sure we all have our favourite among the list.

However, I would mention a few, the upgrading of the Atebubu/Kwame Danso/ Kwadwokrom road, and this would be in honour of our former Chief Justice, Justice Sophia Akuffo, who once gave me a hair-raising account of a trip she took on that road. The second choice I make is the Hohoe-Jasikan-Dodo Pepeso stretch. We shall all be greatly relieved when it is finally done. There are others such as Benchema/Nkwanta/Adjayfua, Bolgatanga/Bawku, Kumasi and Greater Accra Inner City Roads, and this is the first time that five (5) flyovers and interchanges are being constructed at the same time in our history.

Mr. Speaker, I am sure that, like the Year of Return, which, after its success, has now been declared by some as the Decade of Return, we would be declaring a Decade of Roads, until we get a road network that meets the needs of a modern, industrialised Ghana.

Arts and Culture

Mr Speaker, one of the major beneficiaries of the 'Year of Return' was the creative arts industry. Our commitment to the development of

Ghana's creative arts industry is absolute. I inaugurated, in December last year, the National Film Authority, whose function is to supervise an economically, self-sustaining and culturally conscious film industry in the country. The Creative Arts Industry Bill has been presented to Cabinet for consideration, and, once passed by Parliament, the Act will establish the Creative Arts Fund and an agency to promote the industry. Government has also reaffirmed its commitment to the growth of the industry, by commencing the construction of the very first Senior High School in Ghana dedicated solely to the development of the industry. I cut the sod for this construction, in Kumasi, again, in December last year. We are determined to do more.

Revitalised state enterprises

Mr Speaker, we have a good story to tell in many areas. Once derelict State Enterprises have been revitalised. Let me list a few: State Housing Company, Ghana Publishing Corporation, Ghana Post, GIHOC, State Transport Company, Ghana Maritime Authority have all been given a new lease of life, and are functioning with greater efficiency, and becoming again profit centres.

Digitisation has also led to a remarkable improvement in the delivery of public services. We are all greatly relieved, for example, that the hassle has been removed for those who want to get passports. We are equally relieved that DVLA offices are no longer the nightmare places they used to be, and we can get driver's licences without having to go through 'goro' boys. I have not had the experience myself, yet, but I am assured that the STC has been transformed, and it is now a pleasant experience to travel on their buses.

SSNIT has given a guarantee that when people apply for their pensions, they would get them within two weeks. I am told most people get them within ten days, a far cry from the sad, disgraceful and humiliating experience that pensioners used to go through to get their pensions.

We have implemented a digital property address system which gives an address to every location in Ghana. We now have the first of its kind mobile money interoperability payment system in Africa; the port operates a paperless clearance system; business registration is now online; we can now buy electricity units on our mobile phones; and e-

justice system has been implemented at the courts. This process of digitisation is also helping to curb corruption.

Ambulance

Mr. Speaker, for the first time in many years, Ghana has a fully functioning emergency response and ambulance system. As promised, Government has procured three hundred and seven (307) ambulances, with one assigned to each constituency. Each ambulance has a tracker that determines its location instantly from the command centre. The emergency number, one-one-two (112), has also been linked to the Ghanapost GPS system, such that if any call to the number is made using the Ghanapost GPS app, emergency services will know the exact location of the caller instantly.

We are employing drones to deliver emergency medical supplies in remote areas, and, today, Ghana has the largest medical drone delivery service in the world!

Mr Speaker, when the Electoral Commission begins the registration exercise for the compilation of a new voters register in the course of the year, I appeal to all Ghanaians to register. It is our civic responsibility.

Four more to do more

Ghana, Mr Speaker, as she has done periodically, since 1992, is going to conduct, on 7th December, a general election, so that our people can choose the person and persons they want to manage the affairs of the nation on their behalf. This will be the eighth (8th) general election of our history in the 4th Republic. Government, together with all stakeholders, is determined to ensure that it is peaceful and orderly, so that our people can make their choice in freedom and serenity, and exercise their civic duty of helping to elect a government of their choice on 7th December. We should all commit ourselves to uphold the reputation of our nation as a beacon of democracy, and we expect the media to help lead the way in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, despite the achievements of this Government, some of which I have outlined, I hasten to add that we still have some way to go to reach the Ghana we want. Three years ago, when I first stood before you, I said, and I quote "I was not elected by the overwhelming majority

of the Ghanaian people to complain. I was elected to get things done. I was elected to fix what is broken and my government and I are determined to do just that." Mr, Speaker, we have done just that. We have fixed the broken economy, we have delivered Free Senior High School education, we have brought the National Health Insurance Scheme back to life, we have revamped our agriculture, we have sanitised the banking sector, our industrial transformation is on, we are digitising the economy, and Ghana continues to be at peace. We have done much more than we inherited, we are creating conditions for young people to have hope again, and we are determined to do more. Things are working in Ghana, and Ghana is surely changing.

Mr. Speaker, our nation is in good health, and in good, competent hands!

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

I thank you for your attention.