

**Welcome Address at the Official Commissioning of the Headquarters of
the National Industrial Court of Nigeria**

By

**Hon. Justice Benedict Bakwaph Kanyip, PhD, FNIALS, FCTI, FC Arb, bpa
President, National Industrial Court of Nigeria, Abuja, FCT
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1. Courtesies

2. Despite the very many hiccups we experienced (and there are still some even as I speak) in erecting the building we all see today, the day is finally here where we all gather for the historic and epoch-making event of the commissioning of this very beautiful and befitting edifice (the Court complex), which will, upon commissioning today, serve as Headquarters of the National Industrial Court of Nigeria (NICN).

3. In September of 2019, shortly before I took over the reins of leadership of the Court, my predecessor, Hon. Justice B. A. Adejumo, OFR, presently the Administrator of the National Judicial Institute (NJI), oversaw the commissioning, by President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, of the Annex Building of the Headquarters, from where we are moving to the main building.

4. Today's event started 16 years ago when on 10 March 2010 the project site for the Headquarters was handed over to the Contractor, and on 17 May 2010 excavation work commenced. When the directive was given that all government agencies must move to Abuja, the land we presently stand was where the Court of Appeal moved to, and erected its courthouse. Upon building its present Headquarters, the Court of Appeal moved and we were graciously given the building on this land that it left behind. In the wisdom of my predecessor, it was better to have a new building, given that the building left behind suffered from structural problems. And so the journey to today started. And here, I must say thanks to my predecessor.

5. Coming from a very humble background (those who know the Court when it was at Oju-Olobun Street, Victoria Island, Lagos will understand how

humble the background was), what we have achieved today is not just an amazing feat but a milestone in the annals of the Nigerian Judiciary. It is, therefore, with profound gratitude to God Almighty, a deep sense of honour and privilege, and immense joy, that I stand today to welcome you to this historic occasion of the commissioning of the new Headquarters of the NICN by no less a personality than His Lordship Hon. Justice Kudirat Motonmori Olatokunbo Kekere-Ekun, GCON, The Honourable, The Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN).

6. Given thus our very humble background, institutionally, we have come of age in the ramifications expected of a court of law, equity and justice. Today represents for us progress, growth, resilience and the collective determination to build a stronger, more efficient and more responsive justice system for our nation.

7. On behalf of the Honourable Judges, Management and entire staff of the Court, I warmly welcome you, our distinguished guests, to this historic occasion. We are particularly honoured by your presence, despite your demanding schedules, to identify with us on this memorable day. Your presence is not only a demonstration of friendship, goodwill and support, a strong expression of confidence in not just us as the bastion of labour justice, but in the entire Nigerian Judiciary, whose responsibility it is to ensure that access to justice for all is a reality in the country.

8. And so today, we not only commission a physical structure made of concrete, steel and glass, but we celebrate an institution, a vision, the growth of a specialised Court whose mandate has become increasingly important to the peace, stability and economic development of our dear country. Accordingly, the commissioning of our Headquarters today represents another significant milestone in the remarkable journey of the Court.

9. We are continually mindful of our humble beginnings, and our journey to constitutional recognition as a superior court of record in 2011 with jurisdiction over all causes and matters relating to labour, employment, industrial relations and other matters incidental or connected therewith, which journey has been characterised by dedication, sacrifice, reforms and the unwavering commitment of successive judicial officers, administrators and members of staff of the Court who have, in one way or other and at

different times, contributed immensely to the growth and development of this great Court.

10. Labour is not just a critical factor of production, but it is central to economic development. The establishment of specialised labour disputes prevention and resolution institutions is enjoined on Members States by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) given that access to labour justice is a core labour right and part of the decent work agenda promoted by the ILO. The NICN as a specialised Court meets this ILO expectation. As a labour Court, the NICN must ensure a fair and balanced justice system that resolves the labour disputes that are bound to ensue given the ever conflicting nature of the relationships between employers and employees.

11. In this sense, the NICN occupies a unique and strategic position in the world of work. Our responsibility extends beyond just the determination of labour/employment disputes. Our decisions contribute to industrial peace, social justice, economic stability and national development. Through effective access to labour justice, the Court has helped to create an environment where employers and employees pursue their legitimate interests as far as access to labour justice is concerned within the framework of law, fairness and mutual respect.

12. It is, therefore, only appropriate that an institution entrusted with such an important task should continue to develop the infrastructural and institutional capacity necessary for the effective discharge of its constitutional mandate. This new Headquarters is accordingly a significant step in that direction. Our mandate must thus include that commitment of creating a judicial environment that meets the demands of contemporary justice administration. It is designed not merely as an office complex but as a functional judicial institution capable of supporting efficient court administration, improved service delivery and the continued growth of the Court. Adequate infrastructure, effective administration and an environment conducive to the dispensation of justice are critical requirements.

13. The NICN Headquarters with its Annex now boasts of 10 court rooms and an equal number of Chambers for its Judges. Despite that it looks gigantic, we are mindful that as an institution, the NICN is defined not just by the magnificence of the Headquarters but by the quality of the service that those

who occupy it render. We are aware that a beautiful building, however impressive, is only meaningful when the people who work within it remain committed to the ideals for which the institution exists. For us in the NICN, today's occasion is a renewed call to duty. We must recommit ourselves to the fundamental principles of justice, fairness, impartiality, integrity and accountability.

14. Distinguished guests, the completion and hence commissioning of the NICN Headquarters did not happen by accident. The building, as you see it today, is the product of the collective efforts and support of individuals and institutions who believed in the importance of strengthening the National Industrial Court of Nigeria. And here I must once again pay tribute to my predecessor, Hon. Justice B. A. Adejumo, OFR who conceptualised and indeed started its construction.

15. His Lordship would not have gone far but for the support and encouragement he got from the Chief Justices of Nigeria (CJNs), especially the 11th to the 16th CJNs i.e. Hon. Justices Aloysius Iyorgyer Katsina-Alu, GCON (2009–2011), Dahiru Musdapher, GCON (2011–2012), Aloma Mariam Mukhtar, GCON (2012–2014), Mahmud Mohammed (2014–2016), Walter Samuel Nkanu Onnoghen, GCON 2016–2019) and Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad, GCON (2019–2022).

16. When I took over the Headship of the Court in 2019, we continued to enjoy the support of succeeding CJNs, the 16th to the current 18th CJN i.e. Hon. Justices Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad, GCON (2019–2022), Olukayode Ariwoola, GCON (2022–2024) and Kudirat Motonmori Olatokunbo Kekere-Ekun, GCON (2024 to Date). We are from the bottom of our hearts grateful to all these Hon. CJNs for the roles they played in seeing to the realisation of this edifice.

17. As an institution, the recent history of the NICN cannot be told without the special recognition of, and gratitude to, the 8th to 10th CJNs i.e. Muhammadu Lawal Uwais (1995–2006), Salisu Modibbo Alfa Belgore (2006–2007) and Idris Legbo Kutigi (2007–2009). These Hon. CJNs were instrumental in setting the tone in the qualitative development of the Court which saw the passing into law of the National Industrial Court (NIC) Act

2006, culminating ultimately in the Third Alteration Act 2010, which inserted into the 1999 Constitution sections 254A to 254F.

19. The Court of Appeal, through successive Presidents of the Court, who vacated this land upon which the NICN Headquarters is built, deserves our profound gratitude, which we hereby give.

19. In like manner, I take the liberty to recognise and extend our gratitude to the Honourable Attorneys-General of the Federation (HAGFs) who since 2003 not only impacted on the qualitative growth of the Court but also its quantitative growth. Here I have in mind the following HAGFs: Chief Akin Olujimi, SAN, CON; Chief Bayo Ojo, SAN, CON; Chief Michael Aondoakaa, SAN; Prince Adetokunbo Kayode, SAN, CON; Mr Mohammed Bello Adoke, SAN, CFR; Mr Abubakar Malami, SAN, CON; and Prince Lateef Olasunkanmi Fagbemi, SAN. These HAGFs were, for instance, instrumental in especially the relocation of the Court from Oju-Olobun Street, Victoria Island, Lagos to its present location at Lugard Avenue in Ikoyi, Lagos, the promulgation of the NIC Act 2006, and the Third Alteration Act 2010.

20. Given today's occasion, I want to specially recognise and express our gratitude to Chief Bayo Ojo, SAN under whose tenure as HAGF we were allocated this land upon which the Headquarters is built. He was instrumental in getting the approval from President Olusegun Obasanjo, GCFR for this land to be released to us soon after the Court of Appeal vacated it. Our profound thanks go to the learned Silk.

21. The successes posted by the Court could not have been possible without the assistance and instrumentality of both Houses of the National Assembly, and indeed the State Houses of Assembly (who voted favourably for the Third Alteration Act 2010). This is in addition to the budgetary provisions, which the National Assembly made to the Court through the National Judicial Council (NJC).

22. The Presidency and successive Presidents, Commanders-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria since the establishment of the Court vide Decree 7 of 1976 have played very positive roles in seeing the

Court becoming what it is today. We register our profound gratitude in that regard.

23. I acknowledge the successive Ministers of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and their Departmental Staff who oversaw the erection of the NICN Headquarters and ensured that we kept to all regulatory requirements.

24. The NICN Headquarters will house up to 10 Judges of the Court at a time. Their accommodation is already an issue to us. Luckily for us, through the instrumentality of the current Honourable Minister of the FCT, His Excellency Ezenwo Nyesom Wike, CON, His excellency President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, GCFR graciously approved the construction of houses for Judges of the NICN in Abuja. With residential accommodation now assured, and the Headquarters commissioned, all that is left is for us to keep faith with our mandate to dispense labour justice. We accordingly specially commend Mr President and the Hon. Minister of the FCT. We are being given the tools to work. Work then we must. We acknowledge and appreciate the support of the Federal Government of Nigeria and all relevant government institutions whose cooperation and commitment have contributed to the growth and development of the Court.

25. The NJC under the Chairmanship of The Honourable, The CJN, His Lordship Hon. Justice Kekere-Ekun, GCON, remains the engine room that saw to the edifice that we are commissioning today. The funding for the project came through the NJC. When the project commenced, Mr Danladi Halilu, Esq was the Secretary of the NJC. He was succeeded by the current Secretary of the NJC, Mr Ahmed Gambo Saleh, Esq. Together, these two Secretaries midwived all that it took to bring us here today. Three critical Committees of the NJC were central to the midwifing: the Federal Judiciary Tenders Board, the Due Process Committee of the Federal Judiciary, and the Federal Judiciary Budget Monitoring, Evaluation of Projects and Contracts Committee. The Members of these Committees worked tirelessly to see to the fruition of the edifice we are commissioning today. Of course, all would have come to nought if the Members of the NJC had withheld approvals over the years. We register our profound thanks to the Chairman, Members, Management and Staff of the Council in seeing to the completion of our Headquarters.

26. Institutional support within especially the Judiciary is something that we do not take for granted even when such support may not be direct and self-evident. The Federal Judicial Service Commission (FJSC), presently headed by the respectable Secretary, Mrs H. A. Turaki, LB, FICMC, upon whom the regulation of judicial staff is placed, and the National Judicial Institute (NJI), which trains both judicial officers and staff are such institutions that we must thank.

27. To all those responsible for the conceptualisation, planning, design and construction of this magnificent edifice, we say a big Thank You. The contractor, subcontractors, the architects, engineers, builders, consultants, project managers and other professionals who contributed their expertise and labour must be commended for their efforts. The physical beauty and functionality of this structure are reflections of your dedication and professional contributions.

28. I now turn to the NICN family, the judges, management and staff (both past and present). You have been wonderful. Your sleepless nights, long hours of work, collective sacrifices and unmatched dedication have now paid off. But this is not an end itself. We must strengthen our collective determination to serve the Nigerian people with integrity. A new building should produce a renewed spirit. We must, therefore, ensure that the quality of our service reflects the quality of the institution we are privileged to serve.

29. Distinguished guests, the commissioning of the NICN Headquarters comes at a particularly important period in the development of labour and employment relations across the world. The nature of work is changing rapidly. Technology is transforming traditional workplaces. Remote work and digital platforms are creating new forms of employment relationships. Artificial intelligence and automation are reshaping industries and how we even view work. Globalisation continues to influence labour mobility and employment practices. New questions are constantly emerging concerning enterprise sustainability, workers' rights, workplace safety, discrimination, equality, social protection and the future of work.

30. These developments require institutions responsible for labour and employment justice to remain dynamic, knowledgeable and responsive. The NICN must, therefore, continue to develop the intellectual and institutional

capacity necessary to address these emerging challenges. We must administer 21st Century justice using 21st Century tools and approaches. We must be prepared to learn. We must be prepared to adapt. We must be prepared to embrace appropriate technological solutions.

31. The NICN Headquarters provides the structure for us to do all that. It creates an environment for better justice administration. It represents the physical manifestation of our aspiration for a modern and efficient specialised Court. However, we must always remember that buildings do not dispense justice; people do. Technology does not replace judicial wisdom; it supports efficiency. Infrastructure does not guarantee public confidence; integrity does. Consequently, as we celebrate this achievement, we must remain committed and resolute to the values that define the true character of the Judiciary. Integrity must remain our compass. Impartiality must remain our guiding principle. Fairness must remain at the heart of our decisions. Respect for the Constitution and the rule of law must remain absolute.

32. The National Industrial Court of Nigeria belongs to the Nigerian people. It exists to serve the cause and ends of justice. It exists to provide a peaceful and lawful mechanism for resolving industrial and employment disputes. It exists to protect rights and uphold lawful obligations. It exists to contribute to industrial harmony and national development.

33. As Head of this Court, I assure the Nigerian people that we remain conscious of this sacred responsibility. We shall continue to work towards improving access to labour justice. We shall continue to strengthen court administration. We shall continue to promote timely and effective resolution of labour disputes. We shall continue to invest in capacity development for our judicial officers and staff. We shall continue to embrace appropriate measures that enhance the administration of justice. And we shall continue to uphold the highest standards of justice. The law provides the framework within which these interests can be met.

34. The NICN will continue to play its role as an impartial institution dedicated to ensuring that labour/employment disputes are resolved in accordance with the law and the guiding principles of justice.

35. I urge members of the legal profession and all other stakeholders in the administration of justice to continue to support the Court in its efforts to ensure the efficient and timely resolution of cases. We must all recognise that unnecessary delays in the justice system affect not only litigants but also society and the economy. We will strive to balance the twin adages of justice delayed is justice denied, and justice rushed is justice crushed. And so we must collectively embrace measures that promote efficiency without compromising fairness and due process.

36. Distinguished guests, every generation is entrusted with the responsibility of building institutions stronger than those it inherited. We are merely custodians for the period we had the opportunity to be on the saddle and serve. Our responsibility is to leave it better that we found it.

37. As I end this welcome address, let me express a special gratitude to His Lordship Hon. Justice Kudirat Motonmori Olatokunbo Kekere-Ekun, GCON, The Honourable, The Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) whose two years on the saddle have been so impactful in ways unimaginable. There is something about the leadership of His Lordship — one that combines the love, understanding and firmness of a mother. All have been brought to bear in steering the judicial ship of Nigeria. And for us at the NICN, it has been a warm and lovely understanding of the specialised nature of the Court.

38. We have watched closely, admired and imbibed Your Lordship's leadership, which is shaped by commitment to justice, legal reform and transparency. We are conscious that Your Lordship has always stressed the need for judges to focus on substantive justice over technicalities; emphasising the need for industry and clarity in our work. My Lord, we all thank you for not just the values you engender in judicial administration, but in sparing your invaluable time to be with us today and commission our Headquarters. We do not take this for granted. Your Lordship can be rest assured that we will keep to our mandate, to do justice to all, without fear or favour, affection or ill will, and uphold the values that Your Lordship always admonish that judges keep.

39. I welcome you all to this epoch-making event. At the end of the commissioning, I invite you to stay back for our Special Court sitting to mark the 2026/2027 Legal Year. Thank you for your kind attention.