

NBA PRESIDENT'S WELCOME ADDRESS AT THE NIGERIAN BAR ASSOCIATION ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE, 2026, IN PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE.

Protocol,

1. I address you with great honour and joy at the opening ceremony of the Nigerian Bar Association's Annual General Conference, here in the historic and beautiful city of Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State. Port Harcourt (locally called PH, Praccourt, Po-ta-kot or Pi-ta-kwa) is a port city and the largest city of Rivers State in Nigeria. The city is fondly known as Nigeria's "Garden City".
2. Port Harcourt was founded in 1912 by the British colonial Governor, Frederick Lugard. Built along the Bonny River on land acquired from the Ikwerre and Okrika-Ijaw groups, the port's original purpose was to export coal discovered near Enugu. In August 1913, it was named after Lewis Harcourt, the British Colonial Secretary.
3. Port Harcourt was originally selected to host the 2025 Conference, but the NBA subsequently moved the event to Enugu following the political crisis in Rivers State, the declaration of a state of emergency, and the appointment of a Sole Administrator to oversee the affairs of the state. We resolved to relocate the conference because of what we considered a breach of constitutional order arising from the unlawful suspension of the democratically elected government in the State.
4. In line with our commitment to return the Conference to Rivers State, the NBA selected Port Harcourt as the host city for the 2026 edition, following the resolution of the political crisis. Today, we are proud to honour that commitment. We strongly believe that the Conference will afford the good people of Rivers State an opportunity to showcase the hospitality, culture, historic sites, cuisine, infrastructure and civic values for which Rivers State is known.

5. We chose as the theme for the 2026 NBA Annual General Conference, taking place at the Yakubu Gowon Stadium in Port Harcourt from August 21 to August 28, 2026: “**Beyond Limits**”.
6. “**Beyond Limits**” is a call to action. It challenges legal practitioners, institutions, and national authorities to dismantle the physical, mental, political, and socio-economic barriers that have held back justice, governance, and development in Nigeria. It demands a shift from reactive lawyering and governance to bold, pre-emptive, and institution-building solutions, particularly in the areas of national security, institutional growth, and national development.

A Nation of Unrealized Promises

7. When Nigeria gained independence on October 1, 1960, the nation and the global community held high hopes that it would become the democratic and economic giant of Africa, anchored on its rich agricultural wealth, robust human capital, capable institutions, and a powerful voice in international affairs.
8. Our optimism rested on three fundamental pillars:
 - a. Constitutional Democracy: The belief that parliamentary democracy and federalism would successfully harmonise Nigeria’s diverse ethnic and regional identities.
 - b. World-Class Institutions: Expectations of educational institutions producing globally respected graduates and scholars, alongside a capable public service built on merit.
 - c. The Rule of Law: The establishment of a competent judiciary and public service designed to steer a self-reliant and sovereign state.
9. In his Independence Day address on October 1, 1960, the Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, captured the optimism of that moment when he observed: “It seemed that we were destined to move with quiet dignity to our place on the world stage.”

10. Yet, acknowledging the challenges that had already begun to emerge, he noted that “recent events” had “changed the scene beyond recognition,” leaving the country “being tested to the utmost.” Even then, however, he remained confident in the Nigerian spirit, declaring: “We shall not fall for want of determination. And we come to this task better equipped than many.” Those were some of the hopes held out for Nigerians and, in many respects, for the Black race.

11. Sixty-six years later, Nigeria continues to bear the title “Giant of Africa,” earned through its population of over 220 million and its prominent role in shaping Africa’s political, economic, and cultural landscape. Yet, while Nigeria has not fully achieved the expectations and dreams of its founders, it possesses the potential to do so and to become one of the leading countries in the world. Our potential, however, has remained latent, out of focus and, at times, seemingly a mirage.

Notwithstanding, we can go beyond our limits.

12. As lawyers, we are custodians of the promise of Nigeria. We must therefore look beyond the familiar and focus on African leadership, democratic consolidation, institutional reform, and regional integration, particularly as Nigeria and other African countries approach critical political transitions.

The Bar’s Mandate: To Go Beyond

13. To go beyond limits, both as a nation and as legal practitioners, we must venture beyond our usual borders. We must sometimes undertake what appears impossible to reach our dreams and achieve our goals. We must push through our limitations and beyond our comfort zones. There will be no shortcuts. Whatever is worth doing is worth doing well.

14. Going beyond limits requires that we constantly push ourselves and refuse to settle for average. When we encounter resistance, it may seem difficult to overcome. But by pushing a little harder, we can accomplish

great things. And often, once we have done so, we look back and wonder why we ever thought the challenge was as difficult as it appeared. We must not allow limits to determine what we can achieve.

15. This is the moment for the Bar to lead: in defending the Constitution, strengthening institutions, deepening access to justice, driving economic reform, promoting national security through the rule of law, and anchoring Nigeria's role in AfCFTA and regional governance.

16. Over eight days in Port Harcourt, the 2026 Annual General Conference will interrogate how we can go "Beyond Limits" in:

- a. Justice Delivery: Technology, court reform, and clearing the backlog of cases;
- b. Economic Law: E-procurement, the Nigeria First Policy, and investment protection;
- c. Security and Governance: The rule of law as the foundation of national security.
- d. Professional Practice: Legal Tech, ethics, and the future of lawyering.
- e. Social Protection: Implementation of the Employees' Compensation Act and access to justice for vulnerable Nigerians.
- f. Regional Leadership: The role of lawyers in democratic transitions, AfCFTA, and regional governance.

17. The Conference therefore provides an opportunity not merely to examine the challenges confronting our nation and profession, but to ask the harder question: "what must we do differently to move beyond them?"

Our Keynote Speaker: A Life Beyond Limits

18. Our keynote speaker is His Excellency George Manneh Oppong Weah, former President of Liberia and Ballon d'Or winner. His life story is a remarkable masterclass in resilience, determination, discipline, and purpose. From playing football barefoot in the swampy slums of Clara Town, Monrovia, where he was raised by his devoutly Christian grandmother, Emma Klonjlaleh Brown, alongside thirteen (13) siblings,

Weah went on to become a global football icon and the President of Liberia.

19. His journey began amid severe poverty. To escape the hardships around him, he channeled his energy into football, honing his skills on the dusty streets of Monrovia. While playing for local semi-professional teams such as **Mighty Barolle and Invincible Eleven**, he also worked as a switchboard technician for the Liberia Telecommunications Corporation.
20. His breakthrough came when he signed for the Cameroonian club Tonnerre Yaoundé. His talent soon caught the attention of AS Monaco manager Arsène Wenger, who brought him to Europe in 1988, launching an extraordinary 14-year European club career that included some of the biggest clubs in the world.
21. Yet, while enjoying massive fame and success in Europe, Weah remained deeply devoted to his homeland, which at the time was being ravaged by brutal civil wars. He served as a **UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador** and personally committed millions of dollars of his own resources to provide equipment, travel, and other support for the Liberian national football team, the “Lone Star.” He nearly coached and captained the underfunded team to a historic World Cup qualification and, in the process, helped transform it into a rare symbol of national unity.
22. We chose President Weah as our keynote speaker because his life reminds us that “background does not determine destiny”. His story demonstrates that resilience, determination, discipline, focus, and purpose can fundamentally alter the trajectory of an individual’s life and, ultimately, contribute to the transformation of a nation.
23. That is the spirit Nigeria, and the legal profession, must now embrace. The 2026 Annual General Conference is therefore not merely a gathering. It is a charge.

Acknowledgment

- 24.I particularly acknowledge the support of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, our amiable host, the Governor of Rivers State, His Excellency, Sir Similnalayi Fubara, and numerous other dignitaries who are present here today. I thank the Governor for his unquantifiable support towards the successful hosting of this conference and for making sure that the state facilities were fully deployed for our use.
- 25.I once more warmly thank our distinguished keynote speaker, His Excellency George Manneh Oppong Weah, whose remarkable resilience, determination, discipline, and excelling beyond adversity will help set the tone for our conversation on how we will confront our personal and societal economic and professional challenges with courage
- 26.I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the NBA Annual General Conference Planning Committee, the Local Organizing Committee, and the Rivers State branches of NBA for their exceptional efforts in organizing this conference. Their dedication has created a platform for us to reflect, inspire, and act.
27. I also wish to appreciate the Federal Road Safety Corps, the Nigerian Police Force, the Nigerian Army, the Department of State Services, the VIO, United Nigeria Airlines, Air Peace, and all our sponsors for the critical role they have all played towards making sure this conference is a success.

Conclusion

- 28.Over the next few days, we will engage with thought leaders from law, governance, economics, technology, and civil society. I encourage you to participate actively, interrogate assumptions, share boldly, and most importantly, leave here better equipped to stand out, not just for yourself, but for your profession and Nigeria.
- 29.As we engage in this conference, let us commit to go beyond limits through excellence and courage. Let us harness the law to drive

economic freedom, create opportunities, and make the difficult decisions that will secure Nigeria's growth and development. Yes, these choices may bring pain, but they will also bring progress; a Nigeria where every citizen can thrive. The future of our profession and our nation depends on our people's resolve and actions.

30. I must reiterate, as I did in Enugu last year, that we must be seen not as spectators, but as leaders in the movement to revive Nigeria's economy, restore public trust, and reposition our country for greatness. **Let this conference inspire a fresh resolve that in every courtroom, boardroom, chamber, and community we touch, we will lead with excellence, with courage, and with vision.**

31. Let this city inspire us to embrace the difficult decisions that will unlock Nigeria's economic potential and strengthen our profession, knowing that the pain of today will yield the prosperity of tomorrow. May our deliberations be bold, our resolutions transformative, and our commitment to justice unwavering.

32. Let us, as a Bar, choose courage over comfort. Let us push beyond what is familiar, challenge what appears impossible, and refuse to allow our limitations to define our possibilities.

Let us build institutions, not excuses.

Let us defend the promise of Nigeria.

Let us go Beyond Limits.

Mazi Afam Osigwe, SAN
President, Nigerian Bar Association
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