

WELCOME ADDRESS BY THE CHAIRMAN, 2026 ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE PLANNING COMMITTEE AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE NBA CONFERENCE

1. Once upon a time, in 1912, Lord Frederick Lugard set out to find an alternative to the only seaport in the Colony and Protectorate of the territory now called Nigeria. Coal have been found in abundance in Enugu but its evacuation is only through the Lagos Port. Not convenient and it is becoming an irritation to ship through Lagos owing to growing political awareness of “the Agits” because they had begun to organise themselves into unions, making the operations of the Lagos Port more challenging than the colonial administration ever wanted. On board the *SS Ivy*, Lord Luggard ferried through the Forcados network in the mangrove Creeks. Near Okrika Town, he yelled “Eureka”. This place is suitable for the purpose. Building a Port will require funding. Releasing fund will require some lobbying. But Lord Luggard is in faraway Africa while approval for such funding comes from London. Lord Lugard sent a telegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Reflecting the colonial mindset of that era, he wrote: “In the absence of a convenient local name, I would respectfully ask your permission to name the Port after you.” The reply came swiftly: “It gives me great pleasure to accede to your suggestion that my name should be associated with the new port.” Sir Lewis Harcourt, MP, was the Secretary of State for the Colonies then. And Gentlemen and Ladies, that is how this remarkable city came to bear the name Port Harcourt.

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2. I bid you a warm welcome to the Garden City of Port Harcourt, the fourth most populous city in Nigeria after Lagos, Kano and Ibadan. Situated along the Bonny River in the heart of the oil-rich Niger Delta, Port Harcourt has grown into a thriving metropolis with an estimated urban population of about 3.8 million people. Aside its economic significance, it is a city blessed with illustrious sons and daughters, including pioneer lawyers boasting of one of the first set of Senior Advocates of Nigeria Mr Nebo Graham Douglas SAN.
3. On the 30th August 2024 during the inaugural speech of the 32nd President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Mazi Afam Osigwe, SAN, a solemn promise was made to

hold the Annual General Conference in this City. Last year, there was a declaration of State of Emergency which compelled the Association to defer the “hosting promise” to a further date. But as the saying goes “agreement is agreement oh”. Today, we are gathered here in fulfilment of that promise.

4. The theme of this year’s Conference is “Beyond Limits.” Many of you will remember the young boy in movie tilted *The Matrix* who said “There is no spoon.” The lesson from that scene is profound. That the limitations we perceive only exist in our minds. Our theme is deliberately chosen to restate the unwavering hopes of Nigerians and, indeed, Africans, that regardless of any obstacle, every ceiling is actually made of glass and can be shattered. It is our belief that when you leave Port Harcourt, you will do so with an unshakeable conviction that nothing should stand in the way of your dreams and aspirations, as the world is full of limitless potential. All you need is to live it
5. Do you know of any Dynasty in Nigeria that is a 1000 years old? Our Royal Father of the Day is the 20th Traditional Ruler of the Kanem-Borno Empire, one of the oldest and most revered monarchies in Nigeria, His Royal Highness Alhaji Dr. Abubakar Ibn Umar Garbai El-Kanemi sits on the throne of the Al-Kanemi Dynasty, a dynasty that has endured and flourished for over one thousand years despite the tides of challenges it has confronted over the years. Al-Kanemi Dynasty is Beyond Limits! We are deeply honoured by the presence of His Eminence at this Conference.
6. Our Keynote Speaker, **George Tawlon Manneh Oppong Ousman Weah** is another **example of Beyond Limits!** Born on 1st October 1966 in Monrovia, Liberia. He is a man who in the dusty streets of Monrovia honed his talent to make history in 1995, becoming the first, and to date, the only African to win both the FIFA World Player of the Year Award and the Ballon d’Or, bringing immense pride to the African continent. Like the legendary Bob Marley, he used his global influence to focus the World’s attention on the tragedy unfolding in his homeland and the urgent need for international intervention. For his unrelenting believe in Peace, he sacrificed his resources to bring the ugly civil war in Liberia to an end. After the war, he joined politics so as to contribute in rebuilding his country. When he was told that he was not properly fit for the job, he did not give up, he returned to school to overcome

the drop out status that hangs over his head proceeding to earn a Diploma in 2007 a Bachelors Degree in 2011 and a Masters Degree in 2013. He contested and lost elections in 2005 only to return in 2017 to be elected President of Liberia. His remarkable journey is a testament to the fact that barriers exist only to be broken. He truly embodies the spirit of our Conference theme. We are confident that his Keynote Address today will inspire us all to continue shattering every perceived obstacle to our goals.

7. As you participate in this Conference, it will indeed be a missed opportunity if you fail to take advantage of the wealth of knowledge that will be shared by the over 200 speakers assembled here. Your network is your net worth. Beyond the technical sessions, you will have the unique opportunity to interact with over 24,000 lawyers, exchange ideas, build meaningful professional relationships, and forge friendships that may last a lifetime.
8. Rivers State is truly a remarkable State. Beyond its abundant oil resources, it boasts a rich ecological heritage and breathtaking wildlife. I encourage you to visit the Finima Nature Park in Bonny or, if bird watching fascinates you, to explore the Ogbakiri/Elele Wetlands with one of the organised birding groups. If you have never witnessed elephants in their natural habitat, you should consider visiting Andoni Local Government Area, where elephants have continued to coexist peacefully with their human neighbours. I have no doubt that you will enjoy all that Rivers State has to offer.
9. Permit me to express my profound gratitude to the President of the Nigerian Bar Association, the Ifechukwukulu of Nnewi Kingdom, for considering me worthy of the privilege of serving as Chairman of the Annual General Conference Planning Committee. I also thank members of the Bar whose unwavering enthusiasm and commitment have contributed immensely to the success of this Conference. As at the time I mounted this podium, registration had exceeded 24,000 participants, and requests for registration were still coming in.
10. Our heartfelt appreciation also goes to our sponsors, whose generous support has made this gathering possible, particularly Marton Engineering Nigeria Limited, Tantita Security Services Nigeria Limited, and of course the Government and People

of Rivers State. We are especially grateful to His Excellency, **Amaopusenibo Siminalayi Joseph Fubara**, Governor of Rivers State, for committing the resources of the State to ensure that this Conference leaves an unforgettable experience. We say a heartfelt thank you.

11. There is a popular Hausa saying: “Da ɗan gari akan ci gari,” meaning that one needs a local guide to truly find one’s way around unfamiliar terrain. For me, Sammie Somiari, SAN, my able Alternate, has been that dependable guide. We have become so close that I simply call him “Yaya Sammie.”
12. I must also recognise Barbara Omosun, Esq., who graciously stepped away from her responsibilities as Chief of Staff to the NBA President to coordinate the Secretariat of the Annual General Conference Planning Committee. I equally will be remiss if I fail to acknowledge Babatunde Ogala, OFR, SAN who gave his all in the quest to make this Conference truly a worthy experience, and every distinguished member of both the Inner and Outer Bar serving on the AGCPC. Your commitment, cooperation and tireless dedication are reflected in the excellent experience we will enjoy in the next coming days.
13. Finally, I must not fail to appreciate the Local Organising Committee, ably led by Tonye Krukrubo, SAN, who, despite the short time available after their inauguration, hit the ground running and discharged their responsibilities with remarkable dedication and efficiency.
14. Distinguished Conferees, this is Port Harcourt, the weather is inclement. We cannot do anything about the rain, irregardless, we will have fun!

Welcome to the 2026 Nigerian Bar Association Annual General Conference!

Welcome to Beyond Limits!

Thank you, and God bless.

ABDUL MOHAMMED RAFINDADI, SAN
CHAIRMAN 2026 NBA AGCPC