

MESSAGE ON THE STATE OF THE NATION BY THE PRESIDENT
OF THE REPUBLIC,
NANA ADDO DANKWA AKUFO-ADDO,
ON WEDNESDAY, 8TH MARCH 2023, AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
ACCRA.

Mr Speaker, I am glad to be here in this august House to perform, once again, 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, in fulfilment of article 67 of the Constitution.

In accordance with protocol and convention, it is good to see that my wife, the First Lady Rebecca Akufo-Addo, Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, Spouse of Mr. Speaker, Mrs. Alice Adjua Yornas Bagbin, Chief Justice Kwasi Anin-Yeboah, and Justices of the Supreme Court, Chairperson Nana Otuo Siriboe II and Members of the Council of State, Chief of Staff of the Office of the President, Hon. Akosua Frema Osei Opare, and officials of the presidency, Chief of Defence Staff, Vice Admiral Seth Amoama, the Inspector General of Police, Dr. George Akuffo Dampare, and the various Service Chiefs, are all present. Mr. Speaker, the House is also duly honoured by the welcome attendance of the former Presidents of the Republic, their Excellencies John Agyekum Kufuor and John Dramani Mahama, former First Lady, Her Excellency Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings, and the Dean and Members of the Diplomatic Corps.

Mr. Speaker, it is the 8th of March today, and that means it is International Women's Day, the day set aside globally to honour all women. Please allow me to acknowledge and appreciate the significance of the day, and heartily congratulate women all over the world, and especially women in Ghana, for the role they play in realising the dreams, cares and aspirations of humankind and of this great nation. The presence of women leaders, at both the local and national fronts, have advanced rights, enhanced equality, and, in general, improved the living standards and quality of lives of all concerned, including that of men. The theme for this year recognises and celebrates women who are championing the advancement of transformative technology and digital education.

Mr Speaker, apart from my own personal fond memories as a member of this House, Parliament stands as a symbol of our democracy and its values. It stands as a reminder to all of us that our country has chosen to

travel on the path of democracy, and at the heart of that journey is the idea that the government can only govern with the consent of the people. Mr. Speaker, it is important that we stress this point because after thirty years of democratic practice, we may be tempted to take it for granted. We need to remind ourselves that our compatriots, the majority of whom are in their early adulthood, have no personal recollection of the struggles that got us to this point in our development. In the same way that only a small percentage of our population can recall life under colonial rule, similarly the memory of dictatorship, one party rule and military rule is receding into the dim past, and the struggles that have brought us so far are disappearing into the recesses of history.

However, because Parliament directly represents the citizens of our nation in this hallowed chamber, it will always be the reminder of those struggles. It is important we never forget that democracy is not a static achievement, but a process that needs continuous nurturing. Indeed, Mr Speaker, we must remind ourselves that, in our country's political history, it is the restoration of Parliament to its proper place that has always symbolised the restoration of power to the people. And dare I say that when constitutional rule is interrupted, it is Parliament that is shut down, the other arms of government continue to operate.

Thirty years ago, this House convened for the first time to mark the commencement of the Fourth Republic. The early years of the return to democracy were fraught with challenges, but the years have seen the deepening of our democratic culture to a point where a candidate of the minority side in Parliament, today, presides as the Speaker.

This is no mean achievement. Given the way the numbers shaped up in this House after the 2020 elections, many cynics and sceptics predicted a doomsday scenario for this Parliament, but instead of a meltdown, we have witnessed considerable cooperation and unity of purpose among all parties and factions. This is to a large extent a measure of the maturity of our political culture and democracy. We will need even more of such bipartisan maturity to meet the challenges confronting us at this time.

Today, we live in a country in which we enjoy complete freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion and political affiliation. Indeed, freedom of speech has now reached such heights that even members of the diplomatic corps feel able

to join in our national discourse, and pronounce on matters that would be problematic for Ghanaian diplomats in their countries of origin. Nevertheless, Mr Speaker, it seems to me the important thing in our free speech environment is actually to try and hear each other, instead of raising the decibel level of our individual points of view.

Mr. Speaker, to come before this House to deliver a Message on the State of the Nation is a symbol and practical demonstration of accountability, and I have always treated the occasion with utmost respect. This address offers us, as usual, the opportunity to provide an honest assessment of our country's situation, and seek the support of all in addressing it with hope and confidence.

Mr Speaker, when we make an assessment of what the state of our nation is, it would necessarily have to include what state it was in yesterday, the state it is in today and what state it would be in tomorrow, based on reasonable grounds of expectations.

How far back should we be looking to make a judgement on the state of affairs today?

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the issue, above all, that is, quite properly, dominating the concerns of all Ghanaians is the gravity of the economic situation of our country, and how we can quickly stabilise the economy, and work our way back to the period of rapid economic growth. Our currency has been buffeted, our inflation rate has been very high, and, for the first time in our lives, debt exchanges have become the language of everyday conversation.

As such, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a departure from the usual format of Messages on the State of the Nation, and concentrate, predominantly, on the economy, which will enable me, nonetheless, also to make some statements about the state of our agriculture, education, energy, health, infrastructure, mining, tourism and security. This is not to belittle the contribution of the other sectors to the growth of our country, but I believe the exigencies of the moment justify the position I am taking, particularly as all sector Ministers continue to provide official updates on happenings in their respective sectors.

I have said, and many others, including the Managing Director of the IMF, have said that our economy was doing well until COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine took us off course.

Maybe, because of the severity of the present difficulties, or maybe because it suits their preconceived agenda, some people are unwilling to accept that we were on a good trajectory until the arrival of COVID-19. The Ghanaian people, however, accepted this proposition, as evidenced in the results of the 2020 presidential election, which were unanimously endorsed and upheld by the seven-member panel of the Supreme Court.

Mr Speaker, allow me to go back on a short trip down memory lane, and remind ourselves what things looked like back at the beginning of 2020, when I came to this House to give an account on the state of our nation.

This is what I told this House on 20th February 2020, and I quote: "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."

Mr Speaker, that was where we were at the end of February 2020.

Three weeks after this speech, in which I expressed our sympathies and solidarity with China on the difficulties they were having with a new virus, our world changed. The virus, I referred to, arrived in our country and in the rest of the world with a vengeance.

Within weeks, we were in the middle of a lockdown, our airports and land borders were closed. Schools and factories and even markets were closed. The hospitality industry was brought to its knees. Our economy, like much of the rest of the world, went into a tailspin.

We took many decisions, we did many things which, according to the science, were the most reliable and trusted ways to save lives and livelihoods at the time, which may look strange and unnecessary today, but that is from the safe perspective of not waking up to check on the COVID-19 infection or death rate.

Indeed, there were some who suggested that we cancel the national identification registration exercise, and even postpone the 2020 general elections.

Who would have thought that, today, anybody will be questioning the fumigation of schools and markets? I recall, vividly, the straight talking I received from a group of our most eminent physicians and other scientists on the urgency of fumigating all public spaces, including offices, schools, hospitals, markets, churches and mosques. The few who could afford it fumigated their homes.

Today, the science might be that such measures make no difference to the spread of the virus, but criminality or reckless spending cannot be ascribed to the decision to undertake such measures.

Mr Speaker, you might remember that we could not produce veronica buckets fast enough. Today, it is not an obligatory item on anyone's list of purchases.

In dealing with the crisis generally, I did not meet anyone brave enough to suggest that considerations of money should be a hindrance to anything we needed to do in the fight against the virus.

I was and I am grateful that the people of Ghana rose to the occasion and, together, we went through the crisis and came out well by defying the doomsday predictions about the inevitability of dead bodies on our streets. I am grateful that we saw the wisdom in helping each other, and I thank those who contributed their expertise, time and energy to the fight against the virus, and I thank those who contributed to the COVID-19 fund that was set up to help us meet some of the expenditures.

The economic consequences from the pandemic have been devastating.

Mr Speaker, it is precisely because the economic fallout from the pandemic is so widespread and long lasting that it is important to show clearly that the COVID funds were not misused. It is critical that we do not lose the confidence of the people that a crisis that they were led to believe we were all in together was abused for personal gain.

Mr Speaker, it was Government that asked for the COVID funds to be audited, and I can assure this House that nothing dishonourable was done with the COVID funds. The responses from the Ministers for Health and Finance, on January 23 and 25, 2023, respectively, have sufficiently laid to rest the queries from the Auditor General's report, and I believe any objective scrutiny of these statements from the Health and Finance Ministries would justify this conclusion.

We provided five hundred and eighteen million cedis (GH¢518 million) of grants and loans to micro, small and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs) through the NBSSI, now the Ghana Enterprise Agency, in which three hundred and two thousand, five hundred and fifteen (302,515) enterprises benefitted, of which sixty percent (60%) were women-owned. These were MSMEs that were in distress as a result of the pandemic. For some traders, the receipt of one thousand cedis (GH¢1,000) made the difference between the ruin of the household and survival.

In addition, fifty-eight thousand and forty-one (58,041) health workers were employed to supplement the existing health sector workforce. Subsequently, all of them have been absorbed as permanent workers in the health sector. Frontline health workers were also granted fifty percent (50%) tax relief for the period. Was that something to regret? We should be forever grateful for the work that so many people did to keep all of us safe. All households enjoyed free water supply and huge discounts on electricity bills, because access to water was a necessity to ensure people adhered to hygiene practices, and access to electricity was important as everybody was encouraged to stay at home. It also provided an economic cushion to protect lives and livelihoods at a time of difficulty. Today, the government support for utility bills is being projected by some as a waste or to use that word, so beloved of some commentators, profligate.

Mr Speaker, the government took a deliberate decision to try and keep the inevitable disruptions across all our lives down to a minimum in the

education sector, by opening schools and education institutions as soon as it was made safe to do so. It was an expensive undertaking and not universally popular. But faced with the prospect of a whole generation of our children losing irreplaceable years of education, and the real likelihood of many of them dropping out of school forever, we took the brave decision to open the institutions. Even then, it is worth pointing out that the school year has not fully returned to the predictable pre-covid calendar. After the event, some might be tempted to forget the volumes of sanitizer and other logistics it took to keep the schools open and safe, in much the same way as some might now choose to forget the vitriol that came from some who should have known better, threatening hell and damnation when, according to them, the children start dying in the schools. Mercifully, we did not lose a single child to COVID in school. I would like to suggest that, with the best will in the world, Mr Speaker, no auditor can put a figure on the cost of keeping the children in school safely during that crisis, nor the continuing cost of the effect of the pandemic on our young people; not the financial cost, not the emotional cost, and certainly not the social cost. But we must thank the Almighty that we have survived to repair the damage, and begin to rebuild our economy.

Beyond the use of COVID funds, there are legitimate questions being asked about how the country's debt situation got where it is.

Mr Speaker, let me state emphatically that we have not been reckless in borrowing and in spending. It is worth noting that the debts we are servicing were not only contracted during the period of this administration.

Mr Speaker, we have spent money on things that are urgent, to build roads and bridges and schools, to train our young people and equip them to face a competitive world. Considering the amount of work that still needs to be done on the state of our roads, the bridges that have to be built, considering the number of classrooms that need to be built, the furniture and equipment needs at all stages of education, considering the number of children who should be in school and are not, considering the number of towns and villages that still do not have access to potable water, I daresay no one can suggest we have over borrowed or spent recklessly.

Yes, I have been in a hurry to get things done, and this includes massive developments in agriculture, education, health, irrigation, roads, rails,

ports, airports, sea defence, digitisation, social protection programmes, industrialisation and tourism. We can be justifiably proud of the many things we have managed to do in the past six (6) years. As I go around the country, I hear the pleas for roads, schools, hospitals, and, as the rainy season comes, I wish, as every other Ghanaian does, that we would have built more drains than we have. And I wish we had the resources to do more.

But, Mr Speaker, I am proud of the amount of work that we have done, especially in the road sector. Roads constitute the largest number of questions asked in this House by Members of Parliament; a large amount of the monies we borrow are for road construction. Shall we dare stop constructing roads?

Mr Speaker, I would like to state categorically that this Government has built more roads than any government in the history of the 4th Republic, and Mr. Speaker, the details of all these roads are attached in the annex to this Message. I have done so because, last year, when I made a similar pronouncement, I was met with howls and gasps of incredulity from the Minority benches, and so I thought it appropriate, this time, to present it as an annex to the Statement, which will be part of Hansard.

Beyond the construction of roads, Mr Speaker, this NPP administration has:

- implemented successfully a National Identification System with the Ghanacard;
- constructed more railways than any other government in the Fourth Republic;
- established the Zongo Development Fund to address the needs of Zongo and inner-city communities; and under their auspices, we have constructed more infrastructure in the Zongo Communities than any other government in the Fourth Republic;
- constructed more NCA licensed fibre optic cable than any other government in the fourth republic (93% of total);
- increased the proportion of the population with access to toilet facilities from 33% to 59%;
- increased the number of public libraries from 61 from independence until 2017 to 115 in 2022;
- provided more equipment (vehicles, ammunition, etc) to security services than any other government in the Fourth Republic;

- we have successfully implemented the digital address system;
- improved significantly the financing of governance and anti-corruption MDAs like the Ministry of Justice and Office of the Attorney General, NCCE, CHRAJ, EOCO etc.;
- implemented One District, One Factory Initiative. In four years, 106 companies are in operation under 1D1F. 148 factories under construction. This is the largest expansion of that sector since independence;
- constructed more fish landing sites than any other government in the Fourth Republic;
- established Africa's first national scale electronic pharmacy platform;
- provided free Wifi to 700 senior high schools, the 46 Colleges of Education, 260 district education offices, and an initial successful pilot of 13 public universities;
- introduced drones in the delivery of critical medicine, vaccines and blood to people in remote parts of the country and today, Ghana has the largest medical drone delivery service in the world with six Zipline Distribution Centres in Omenako, Mpanya, Vobsi, Sefwi Wiawso, Kete Krachi and Anum; and
- overseen an improvement in revenue collection, with the introduction of an e-VAT and e-Invoicing System. For example, figures from nineteen (19) taxpaying companies onboarded unto the e-Vat system revealed total recorded monthly sales increasing from two hundred and twenty-two million cedis (GH¢222 million) in November 2021 to seven hundred and twenty million cedis (GH¢720 million) in November 2022. Again, in December 2021, total monthly sales of two hundred and eighty-four million cedis (GH¢284 million) also saw a huge increase to one billion cedis (GH¢1 billion) in December 2022.

Indeed, the evidence of how state funds have been used to improve our society is all over the country. No district or constituency has been left out. And I believe there are many Ghanaians who will vehemently disagree when some say there is nothing to show for all the funds that have been at my government's disposal.

Mr. Speaker, I would like, at this stage, to brief the House on how the talks with the International Monetary Fund have been going since the announcement on 1st July 2022 of our intention to engage the IMF for a funded Programme.

Mr. Speaker, having reached the Staff Level Agreement on 12th December, 2022, after five (5) months of intense negotiations, and completion of most of the prior actions required under the Agreement, we are on course for the IMF Staff to present to the IMF Executive Board Ghana's Programme request for a three billion dollar (US\$3 billion) Extended Credit Facility by the end of the month.

Mr. Speaker, the 3-year IMF Programme, anchored on Government's Post COVID-19 Programme for Economic Growth (PC-PEG), aims at restoring macroeconomic stability and debt sustainability, whilst protecting the vulnerable. It is a strong reform programme, which relies on frontloaded fiscal measures to increase domestic resource mobilisation and streamline public expenditures to support inclusive growth and enhance social protection.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the House for its support throughout this process, including the passage of key revenue laws. However, a few more of these measures, namely Income Tax (Amendment) Bill, Excise Duty & Excise Tax Stamp (Amendment) Bills, as well as the Growth and Sustainability Levy Bill, are outstanding, which need the urgent attention of the House and passage to complete the prior actions. This will put us in readiness for our presentation to the Fund Board, and, more importantly, bolster our domestic revenue mobilisation efforts.

Mr. Speaker, it is clear that, given the extent of the fiscal and debt sustainability issue we are addressing, fiscal adjustment and structural reforms are not sufficient for restoration of debt sustainability. A critical component of the measures we are implementing to address the current economic crisis is the debt operation, involving both domestic debt and external debt. The debt operation is aimed at returning the country to debt sustainable path by 2028, by reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio on a general classification basis and, in present value terms, from one hundred and three percent (103%) in 2022 to fifty-five percent (55%) by 2028; and reducing the external debt service-to-revenue ratio from twenty-nine percent (29%) in 2022 to eighteen percent (18%) by 2028.

Mr. Speaker, in order to achieve these goals, the decision was taken to execute a Domestic Debt Exchange Programme (DDEP), in addition to fiscal adjustment, external debt operation and structural reforms.

The participation rate of eighty-five percent (85%), representing tendered bonds of eighty-three billion cedis (GH¢83 billion) out of the total eligible bonds of ninety-seven point seven billion cedis (GH¢97,749,624,691), constitutes significant success for the DDE Programme. The eighty-three billion cedis (GH¢83 billion) bonds that were successfully tendered, also, represents sixty-four percent (64%) of the outstanding domestic debt stock of one hundred and thirty billion cedis (GH¢130 billion) at the end of December 2022, as pension funds have been expressly exempted from the DDEP.

I want to take this opportunity to thank organised labour, pensioners, pension fund managers, the Ghana Association of Banks (GAB), Ghana Securities Industry Association (GSIA), Ghana Insurers Association (GIA), the Individual Bond Holders and Retirees Forum, and all others who have contributed to make the Domestic Debt Exchange Programme a success.

Mr. Speaker, I know it has been said over and over again in the past few weeks, but the voluntary nature of the DDE Programme bears repeating, as is the fact that the Government is committed to honouring all coupon payments and maturities in respect of both old bonds and the new bonds in line with Government fiscal commitments.

Mr. Speaker, we are also making progress on the external debt negotiations since the Government announced an external debt service suspension on 19th December 2022 for certain categories of external debt, to ensure an orderly restructuring. This suspension is an interim emergency measure toward a comprehensive external debt operation which will contribute to the restoration of our debt sustainability in line with our request for a debt treatment under the G20 Common Framework. I want to express our appreciation to the members of the Paris Club and to the Peoples' Republic of China for the co-operation they have so far exhibited to us in attempting to reach an agreement, and in their attempt to establish an Official Credit Committee. We look forward to their fast-tracking the needed financing assurances for IMF approval. We are confident that, with their co-operation, we will reach our March deadline for going to the Fund.

Mr. Speaker, we remain resolute in our vision to restore macroeconomic stability and promote inclusive growth.

Mr Speaker, Government recognises that sustained growth must be deliberate, especially in a global landscape marked by forces of technology, trade, and intense competition. It requires a combination of leadership, social cohesion, and deep investments in core capabilities of people, firms, and institutions to harness our opportunities. This is why together with our private sector counterparts, we are anchoring Ghana's medium-term growth drivers on competitiveness, integration, adaptation and digital innovation, all aimed at raising per capita GDP from the current two thousand, five hundred dollars (US\$2,500) to four thousand, five hundred dollars (US\$4,500) (aligning with the Ghana Beyond Aid Charter) by 2030.

Mr Speaker, concluding the arrangements with the Fund will not restore our fortunes overnight, but it will set us on the road to recovery. With fiscal discipline, we will regain the trust and confidence of our business partners and the investor community, which will give us space to continue our productive plans and policies.

However, in addition to our engagement with the Fund, we are also seeking and implementing some original and innovative ideas to try to solve our problems. For example, the Gold Purchase Programme by the Bank of Ghana and the Gold for Oil Policy are creative uses of our resources, which are already bearing fruit. These policies are aimed at achieving two results that are critical to the health of our economy. Firstly, they will help us preserve foreign exchange, especially the US dollar, and secondly, they will enable us to stabilise the price of oil products such as petrol and diesel on the domestic market. We have already seen some success on both fronts with the price of US dollars and petroleum products falling since we announced the policy and began to implement it.

The average price of petrol at the pump, which had risen to twenty (20) cedis a litre, in the middle of December 2022, is now thirteen cedis and eighty pesewas (GH¢13.80) a litre. The price of diesel had risen to more than twenty-three cedis and seventy pesewas (GH¢23.70) a litre and is now selling on the average at thirteen cedis and eighty pesewas (GH¢13.80) a litre, which is a reduction of almost ten cedis a litre. We expect this trend of falling fuel prices to reflect soon in our daily lives, since transport fares affect the price of everything. I hope the trend of prices going up and coming down become a regular feature of our retail economy as is being demonstrated in the fuel prices. Because, as we all

know, prices, especially of petroleum products, used only to go up in our country.

I do worry about the extraordinary expenditure on security at our borders but we do not have a choice but to spend resources to keep our borders safe. We dare not compromise on the safety and security of our nation, and my first responsibility as your Commander-In-Chief is to keep all of us safe. The foundation for all development is the safety and security of our nation and its people.

The reality of the state of affairs in our neighbourhood demands that the government goes to great lengths to ensure the security, safety and stability of our nation. The threats of terrorism and violent extremism surrounding us require that we pay maximum attention to protecting our borders, and working in collaboration with our neighbours to keep our country and the Region safe. This is the prime motive for the Accra Initiative, which is already yielding results.

Mr. Speaker, I am able to cite here some of the equipment we have provided the military to help them protect us all. Allow me to list a few. The Army has received one hundred and four (104) armoured personnel carriers; seventy (70) utility troop carrying vehicles; twenty (20) armoured vehicles; eighty-five (85) assorted Toyota vehicles; fifty (50) Ankai buses; forty (40) Jeep J8 vehicles; some Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) equipment; large quantities of communication/surveillance equipment; varying quantities of weapons and four (4) un-manned aerial vehicle systems; and the Ghana Navy has taken delivery of four (4) offshore security vessels and four (4) Zodiac boats.

We have also continued the process of upgrading the housing needs of the security services. The Barracks Regeneration Project Phases I and II, the Military Housing Project Phases I and II and the Ghana Military Academy Infrastructure project are expected to be completed and handed over by the end of May this year.

Mr Speaker, we continue to pay attention to the Police Service. We can now see more of the police on our streets in the urban areas. Ever so gradually, driving on our roads is becoming more orderly. I note that even motorbike riders now stop at traffic lights. Things are improving. Five hundred and four (504) housing units, comprising seventy-two (72) one (1) bedroom and four hundred and thirty-two (432) self-contained units

have been completed for the Police Service. Recently, I delivered one hundred (100) pickups, six hundred (600) motorbikes and six (6) armoured personnel carriers to the Police Service to boost operational capacity. For the first time in our nation's history, the Police Service has dedicated helicopters to help with their operations.

Mr. Speaker, I must share some good news with the House. I am particularly proud of the dramatic intervention Government has made to tackle the long lasting and utterly disgraceful problem of dilapidated and inadequate number of courts in our country. Many of the courts have not been fit for purpose, and do not provide suitable facilities for the efficient administration of justice. The inadequacy means that people have to travel long distances to gain access to courts. As someone who for years earned my living as a practising lawyer, I have first-hand experience of the unacceptable state of court houses around the country and I am glad to inform the House that we are resolving this problem. Through the Ministry of Local Government and the District Assembly Common Fund, Government has embarked on the construction of one hundred and twenty (120) courthouses with accompanying accommodation for judges across the country. Indeed, sixty (60) have been completed, and the others are at various stages of completion. For the first time ever, we have the happy situation of purpose-built courthouses with accommodation that are waiting for judges to be appointed to put them to use.

Six new Regional High Courts, fitted with judges' residences, are also being constructed in the new regions, i.e., Ahafo, Bono East, North East, Oti, Savannah and Western North. Three of the courts, that is those in North East, Oti, Savannah have been completed and commissioned. Those in Ahafo, Bono East and Western North Regions will be completed by April.

Mr. Speaker, I had the pleasant duty on 17th October 2022, to commission a new, modern Court of Appeal complex in Kumasi, together with twenty (20) townhouses and a guesthouse to serve as permanent residences for Court of Appeal Judges based in Kumasi, who are mandated to handle appeals from the northern part of the country. The Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, who generously gave the land, was present at the ceremony. It is a truly magnificent site and I recommend it to Honourable Members who go to Kumasi to pay a visit and see it for themselves.

In addition, two hundred and ten (210) vehicles were, earlier in 2022, distributed to all judges in the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal, High Court and Lower Courts.

Mr. Speaker, it is a well-known fact that, in this administration, TVET and STEM feature frequently in all conversations about education. Technical and vocational education is being given the place of honour they deserve. Since the re-alignment and introduction of free TVET, enrolment in TVET schools has increased from thirteen thousand (13,000) in 2021 to forty-seven thousand (47,000), and all the indications are that this is a trend that will continue. In 2022, the TVET service recruited three thousand, four hundred (3,400) staff, the highest in the history of TVET in Ghana, to accommodate this development.

I was told last week about one young person who was placed in Achimota School in the current school placement exercise, and has turned it down to go to a STEM school. I think we are making progress. The strides we are making in education are already changing lives and changing the narrative. As at this year, nearly two million young people have benefitted from the free SHS policy. Predictions that the policy would lead to a lowering of standards proved wide of the mark. On the contrary, the results under the free SHS have shown a systematic improvement and as a result 2 million young people have either found a pathway to further education, training, apprenticeships or employment because of the free SHS policy.

I am proud of the additional infrastructure in education, especially the provision of ultra-modern classroom blocks for several schools, which are equipped with laboratories, ICT centres and libraries; the establishment of ten (10) STEM centres across the country including one in Accra to aid the study of engineering and robotics. Construction has started of the University of Agricultural Science in Bunso in the Eastern Region.

Mr. Speaker, apart from the enhancement of revenue and the judicious use of resources, we are all agreed that we need to do something about our huge import bill. Last year, I set up a five-member ad hoc Cabinet committee to work on a policy to enhance domestic production and export development with a four-fold strategy to: (1) reduce the country's import bill in the short-, medium- and long-term; (2) enhance domestic productive capacity in selected products; (3) generate widespread employment opportunities; and (4) diversify and expand our export

capacity to Africa and beyond, especially through the vehicle of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

In 2021, Ghana's total import bill was put at US\$13.7 billion, according to GRA/ICUMS. On the evidence of existing local productive capacity, we have identified a list of twenty (20) priority products in the categories of primary agricultural products, processed foods, and manufactured goods, where we can confidently enhance domestic production. Amongst these are rice, fish, poultry, fruit juice, sugar, tomatoes, vegetable oils, oil palm, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, soaps and detergents, insulated wire, ceramic products, corrugated paper and paper board, cement/clinker, and motor vehicles.

The report on the implementation modalities to enhance domestic productive capacity in these products has been prepared and, once confirmed, the new Minister for Trade & Industry will roll-out urgently a series of initiatives to implement the policy.

I want, at this stage, to make mention of one particular programme that has been introduced by the Government to address the needs of the youth and women, the YouStart programme. This programme seeks to support young entrepreneurs to gain access to capital, market, training and technical skills, compliance and quality assurance support and business development support services that will enable them start, build and grow their own businesses.

Mr. Speaker, the YouStart programme was successfully piloted in 2022 with seventy (70) youth-led businesses benefiting from the initial GH¢1.98 million. Subsequently, a total of two hundred and eighty-eight thousand, eight hundred (288,800) applications have been received and are being processed by the Ghana Enterprise Agency for full operation.

Mr. Speaker, Government remains committed to infrastructure development. Working with the private sector, we continue to explore the use of Public-Private Partnership arrangements as a financing alternative to the delivery of critical public infrastructure, such as the Accra-Tema Motorway Extensions, Accra-Takoradi Motorway, and Sogakope-Lome Transboundary Water Supply Projects.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, the seven hundred- and fifty-million-dollar (\$750 million) AFRExim Bank facility, which has been secured, will make it

possible for us to construct many other roads and interchanges, including the long-awaited four-tier Suame Interchange.

Mr. Speaker, we have now reached the point where we feel the impact of technology as an irreversible way of life. We have digitised many processes; the Ghana Card has become a one-stop shop for Ghanaian identity and its usages.

We are fully convinced that our embrace of, and investment in information technology and the digital infrastructure will help us to redefine our traditional concepts of time, space, speed and nature of conducting business within our society, economy and culture. Information technology helps all segments of society to be integrated and transformed through connectivity, in facilitating the production, distribution, and consumption of information within the whole economy and society.

We have integrated many processes within the digital environment, and for this we have to recognise the efforts of many component parts of the government, such as the Ministry of Communications and Digitalisation, the National Identification Authority, and especially the Vice President, Dr. Alhaji Mahamudu Bawumia, who, I understand, has been nicknamed E-Bawumia. Our need for technological reinforcement within all our structures and spaces is unending, and we will continue to push the frontiers of our engagement with the technologies of information, economic development and human transformation.

We must be cheered by the improvements being made in the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) to make access easier. The scheme is currently one of the better-digitalised institutions, and I hope they get the public support that they need. I note, in particular, with satisfaction, that they have developed a self-enrolment mobile application (**My NHIS App**) that allows Ghana Card holders to self-enrol in the scheme and this application enables registration and renewal for oneself and others by linking NHIS cards to Ghana cards. In 2022, over 5 million members' data was linked to their Ghana card to enable them to access healthcare using the card.

The National Health Insurance Authority has also improved its claims management processes with an emphasis on e-claims and paperless systems at all four Claims Processing Centres. In the year under review, electronic claims processing was about seventy percent (70%) of all

claims submissions. As of 31st December 2022, the scheme paid a total claim of GH¢1.014 billion to health service providers.

Mr Speaker, our drone delivery service is firmly established and Ghana now has six (6) centres for Zipline drone services, making Ghana the largest aerial logistics distribution network in the world. Zipline, through the national-scale drone delivery services, has delivered some 14.8 million (14,809,463) units of life-saving medicals, vaccines, and blood products to health facilities in Ghana by the end of 2022. Childhood vaccines top the list with the delivery of 8.3 million doses, followed by 2.05 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines.

Mr. Speaker, I must say, however, that the current shortage of some childhood vaccines in the country has concerned me greatly. This shortage, if prolonged, will affect negatively Ghana's Childhood Immunisation Programme, which has been recognised as one of the most successful in the world. The WHO has only recently expressed worry about a steady decline in measles vaccination coverage globally, because of the concentration on the fight against COVID-19.

In accordance with our desire not to become part of this global trend, Government has taken steps to ensure that stocks of these vaccines are procured and supplied, as a matter of emergency. The Ghana Health Service has developed an elaborate programme to catch up on children who have missed their vaccinations immediately stocks arrive.

Mr. Speaker, I want to encourage all parents and caregivers to ensure that eligible children are vaccinated, once this programme begins. No child should be denied access to vaccination. Mercifully, so far, not a single child has died as a result of the outbreak.

This House has already passed into law the National Vaccine Institute Bill, which is yet to be brought for my assent. In the near future, this Institute will ensure that, no matter what happens to the global vaccine supply chain, we can produce our own vaccines locally.

Mr. Speaker, government continues to prioritise agriculture as one of the driving forces for economic transformation. The experiences and lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict justify sufficiently our increased investment in the agricultural sector. Indeed, the sector recorded significant successes, with an average growth rate of

6.28% from 2017 to 2021. The consistent growth over the period has translated into improved food security, job opportunities along agricultural value chains and availability of raw materials for industry.

To address the vexed issue of post-harvest losses, we have constructed some sixty-five (65) warehouses, with the remaining fifteen (15) at advanced stages of completion. This intervention is adding some eighty thousand metric tonnes (80,000mt) to national grain storage capacity. US\$29.9 million worth of machinery and equipment have been procured from Brazil to boost mechanisation. Government will, this year, commence preparatory works for establishing a Tractor and Backhoe Loader Assembly Plant in the Ashanti Region, and continue capacity building of operators to ensure effective management and prolong the lifespan of agricultural machinery.

Mr. Speaker, the impact of climate change and variability on global agricultural activities is a call to us, and, indeed, all countries, to adopt appropriate technologies and other innovative practises for sustainable agriculture and resilience against food insecurity. Government's response has been to continue to invest in irrigation infrastructure both large and small scales across the country. In 2022, government completed the rehabilitation and modernisation of large-scale irrigation schemes at Tono, Kpong and Kpong Left Bank projects. The three schemes are expected to provide six thousand, seven hundred and sixty-six hectares (6,766ha) of irrigable land for all-year-round crop production. Phases I and II of the Tamne Irrigation Project have also been completed, with Phase III of the project at fifty-seven percent (57%) completion.

Mr. Speaker, we are now at the most difficult stage of electricity provision around the country. The parts that are left are the very difficult to access areas. The National Electricity Access rate increased from 79.3% in 2016 to 88.54% in 2022, making us amongst the top six (6) in Africa, and we are still expecting to achieve the ninety percent (90%) universal electricity access rate by 2024. To reduce transmission system losses and voltage fluctuations and to improve the overall quality of power supply, old lines are being replaced on the Western, Eastern, Coastal and Middle corridors. It is worth noting that three (3) new sub-stations have been commissioned between 2021 and 2022 thereby improving reliability and efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to inform the House that the Electricity Company of Ghana, has since the last quarter of 2022, embarked on an aggressive digital transformation programme.

In the first phase of this programme, set to be completed by end of April 2023, the focus is on creating a cashless and efficient payment system. I am pleased to announce that, on 1st March 2023, all ECG District Offices became cashless. This is a major achievement by all standards. Since the start of this transformational programme, we have so far seen a twenty-five percent (25%) increase in the monthly revenues. The second phase of the programme will see the digitisation of postpaid bills, and the digital tagging of all metres.

In our estimation, these initiatives should increase the monthly revenues of ECG by some forty percent (40%) before the end of this year. I firmly believe that the initiatives, which have been so boldly rolled out by ECG, will make revenue leakage a thing of the past, and address consumer pain points in their interactions with ECG.

Mr. Speaker, we continue the fight against galamsey with the support of the security agencies, in the short-term. However, we are determined to promote responsible small-scale mining through Community Mining Schemes. So far, sixteen (16) of these Schemes have been commissioned, with three (3) more to be commissioned by the end of this year. All these Schemes are supported with Gold Katchas, pieces of equipment designed to help small-scale miners to extract gold from the ore without the use of mercury.

In 2021, I launched the National Alternative Employment and Livelihood Programme. The Programme employs several youth in the production of seedlings and reclamation of degraded mined lands. Currently, reclamation is ongoing over one thousand hectares (1,000ha) of degraded lands in Ashanti, Eastern and Western North Regions.

Mr. Speaker, on the international front, I should state that having gained a seat as a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the years 2022 and 2023, Ghana, as one of three Non-Permanent African Members, is working vigorously to push the Africa agenda, which includes the fight against terrorism, and the reform of the UN Security Council. I am pleased to state that good progress is being made on the reform of the UN Security Council. A US President, for the first time, in the person of President Joe

Biden, and the French President, Emmanuel Macron, have both embraced the Reform process. It is our hope that the leaders of the three other P5 Members of the Security Council will soon do the same, and help bring about this much needed reform that will bring greater effectiveness to the work of the United Nations and the Security Council in the maintenance of international peace and security.

We continue to be active members of the African Union and ECOWAS, and support strongly measures both bodies have taken against unconstitutional changes in government in our Region. We are working with our partners in the Region to strengthen regional co-operation in the fight against the terrorist menace in West Africa, hence our commitment to the Accra Initiative.

Mr Speaker, our decision to prioritise tourism, as a key policy for economic diversification, job creation and growth, is clearly paying off. The World Economic Forum Report 2021 Travel Index ranks Ghana as the number one tourism destination in West Africa. The potential contribution of tourism and the arts to GDP is, therefore, one that we must nurture and emphasise.

Both domestic and international tourism are rebounding significantly from the severely disruptive impact of COVID on the travel and tour industry. International arrivals nearly trebled last year, from a low of three hundred and fifty-five thousand, one hundred and eight (355,108) in 2020, to over nine hundred and fifteen thousand (915,000). Domestic visits to tourist sites are also up by over 55.7% during the period. All these have been made possible by deliberate marketing initiatives and upgrades of tourist infrastructure by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and its Agency, the Ghana Tourism Authority.

"Beyond The Return" initiative, which I launched in 2019 as a sequel to the Year of Return, has re-ignited excitement about Ghana as the hub and a Mecca for the Global pan-African, a home every person of African descent must visit at least once in their lifetime. A few days ago, at a historic ceremony in Washington DC, we conferred Ghanaian citizenship on Mother Viola Fletcher (108 years) and her brother Uncle Red (102 years), two of the only three living survivors of the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. In May this year, I will be chairing a Tourism Stakeholder Retreat on "Rethinking Tourism for National Development & Job Creation". I have tasked the Ministry and its Agency, the Ghana Tourism Authority, to work

on the modalities to bring together all the stakeholders within the industry. Over the next couple of years, my government will deepen even further our efforts to make tourism a strong primary source of growth for the economy.

Mr Speaker, Monday was 6th March, our Independence Day, and this year we had the main celebrations in the Volta Region.

I made the decision to rotate the Independence Day anniversary celebrations in order to enhance the cohesion and unity of our nation, and to make it clear to all segments of our population that we are all part of the "One Ghana Project". I am glad to inform the House that it was a happy and grand event, set against the breathtakingly beautiful background of the Adaklu mountains.

Mr. Speaker, sixty-six (66) years since our independence, Ghana has taken steady strides to becoming a more developed country. The Ghana of 1957 is not the Ghana of 2023. We have come a long way since the days of our six million population, with very few modern amenities for its people, to today's population of thirty-two million, with a growing stock of modern infrastructure, spanning drones to supply our medicines, to the Ghanacard which identifies each of us as proudly Ghanaian. As President, I have championed the innovation of policies and the execution of projects that have helped improve the quality of life of the Ghanaian people. And, God willing, I will continue on a path that brings the most benefit to the people of Ghana.

Things may be dire today, nonetheless, we must count our blessings. Our petrol stations have fuel, and we have been spared long, winding queues to fuel our vehicles. Our markets and shops are, by the Grace of God, well-stocked, and we have not been faced with the prospect of the rationing of basic necessities such as fruits and vegetables. Our children's schooling has not been interrupted. We have continued to provide Free SHS, Free TVET and pay teacher and nursing training allowances. Our electricity supply has been consistent, and we have been spared the hardship of **Dumsor** during such a trying time. Our country continues to be stable and at peace.

Throughout history, there are many instances of nations going through periods where dark clouds create shadows that momentarily shield the yearned-for vision from sight. Such moments should not be ones in which

despair takes over. Such moments call for strength of character, sense of purpose and an abiding commitment to the general good.

Fellow Ghanaians, let us believe in ourselves, and in our capacity to overcome the problems that are before us. This is a phase, and, with every fibre of my being, I am certain that this too shall pass. We have done it before, and we will do it again.

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

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your attention.