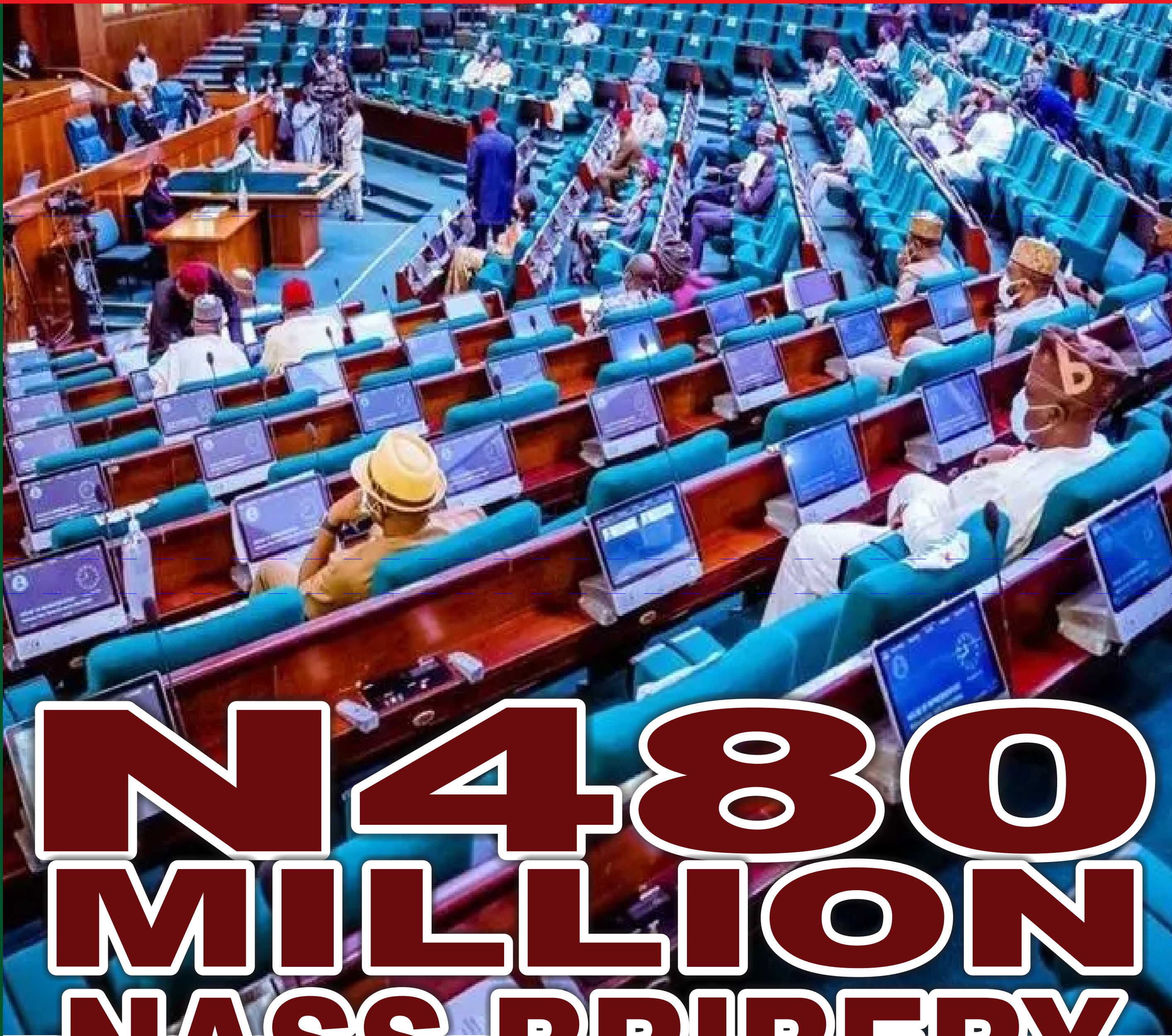
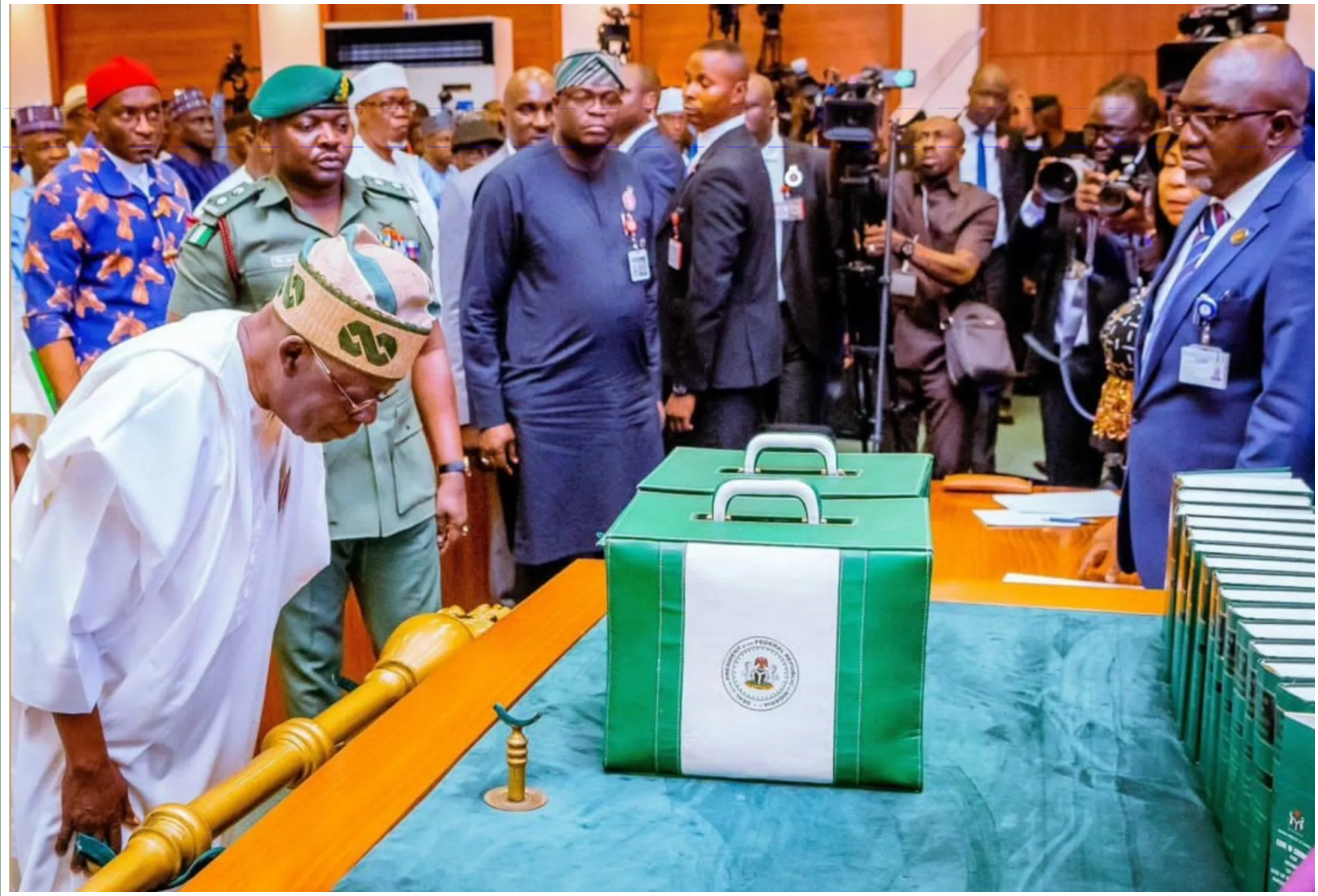


N480 MILLION NASS BRIBERY SCANDAL

- ***It is cheap blackmail… NASS***
- ***Nigerians react ...It's their stock in trade***
- ***HEDA, Civil Society call for probe***

Again some lawmakers in the Nigerian National Assembly have set up a bribery scheme targeting federal universities and other tertiary institutions in the country. PREMIUM TIMES can report that lawmakers are using intimidation and threats to force the heads of universities to pay N8million each to approve their allocations in the 2025 budgets. This Newspapers s investigation revealed that the extortion scheme involves Senators and members of the House of Representatives. The lawmakers operating through the Senate Committee on Tertiary Education and TETFund and the House Committee on University Education are demanding money from universities to approve their budgets. Using an elaborate and complex system created by lawmakers, 60 federal university vice-chancellors are required to pay N8 million each (N4 million each to Senate and House Committees) The lawmakers are expecting N480 million from the extortion and they have assigned two vice-chancellors from the North central and the North west geo- political zone to coordinate the payment to avoid detection. In December 2024 President Tinubu presented the federal budget to joint session of the National Assembly. Committees of the National Assembly are currently conducting budget defense sessions with various ministries, departments and agencies appearing before the relevant Committees to justify their proposals. Over the years there had been allegations of bribery involving lawmakers and insertion of phantom projects into the budgets. For many university vice-chancellors who have appeared before the two committees, the experience has been the same: lawmakers brazenly demand bribes in exchange for budget approval. Vice-chancellors who refuse to comply are threatened with probes or the non-passage of their institutions' budgets. It was gathered that the House Committee, chaired by Hassan Fulata (APC, Jigawa), set the extortion scheme in motion on 16 January during a meeting with some vice-chancellors. At the meeting, the VCs were given clear and firm instructions about what was expected of them. Initially scheduled for 10 a.m. that day, the meeting was delayed until 3 p.m. due to behind-the-scenes discussions between lawmakers and some vice-chancellors.

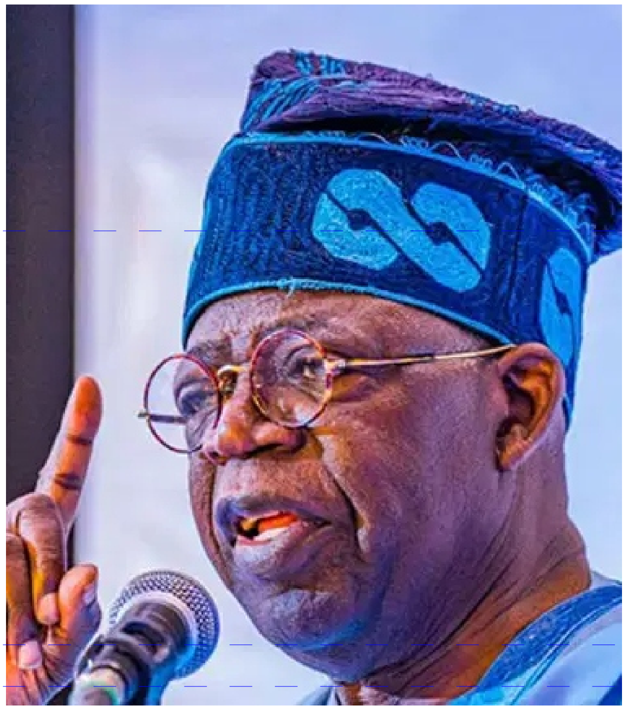
Speaking anonymously for fear of being victimized, one of the vice-chancellors said the lawmakers were explicit in their demands. The source revealed that the lawmakers criticized the vice-chancellors for not cooperating, unlike other institutions that comply without resistance. At one point, the tone of the meeting became more threatening. Sources at the meeting said the committee members "cajoled, threatened, and even humiliated" some vice-chancellors. "They threatened us with probes if we failed to play ball with them," one attendee told PREMIUM TIMES. He added, "Most other agencies are not grumbling like the VCs". The majority of the vice-chancellors reportedly grumbled and complained about the lawmakers' demands, expressing frustration over the repeated extortion. However, the more they complained, the more aggressive the lawmakers became, escalating their threats of probes. One vice-chancellor raised concerns about the possibility of facing further investigations by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), citing a similar experience they had with another House committee exposed by a PREMIUM TIMES investigation.



In 2023, PREMIUM TIMES uncovered how a committee of the House established an extortion scheme targeting

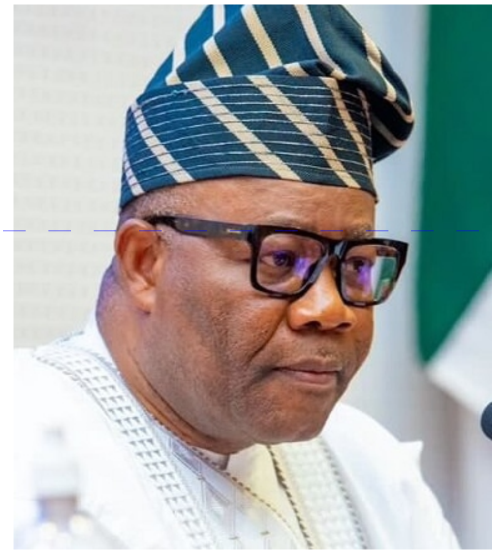
In previous cases, committees have initiated investigations solely to intimidate or humiliate individuals. PREMIUM TIMES has reported extensively on lawmakers' use of such tactics to pressure agencies into submission. Closed-door sessions have become an effective tool for lawmakers to negotiate bribes and coerce ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs). Furthermore, the House Committee on University Education has a reputation for excluding the House Press Corps from its proceedings, limiting transparency. Investigations have also revealed that most of the oversight functions carried out by some of the committees have become avenues for settlement most of which are done in local and foreign currencies.

universities, colleges of education, and polytechnics. In that report, this paper exposed how the lawmakers used a Bureau De Change operator to collect their illicit funds. The investigation eventually led to an ICPC Probe, but not much has been heard about the exercise. Many Nigerians believed that as usual the case has been swept under the carpet as a lot of water may have passed under the bridge. Little wonder people keep wondering why the entire system appears not to be working especially when lawful institutions that are supposed to uphold the sanctity of the integrity and transparency in the system have become hotbed of subversion and corruption.



Responding to the concerns raised about the ICPC, one of the lawmakers reportedly remarked, "Even the ICPC appears before us to defend its budget. The same goes for the Inspector General of Police (IGP)." PREMIUM TIMES contacted the ICPC spokesperson, Demola Bakare, by phone to react to the insinuation of compromise against the anti-graft agency. He laughed off the claim that the ICPC had paid money to any committee. "You can see that I'm laughing. I'm hearing this for the first time. I will need to check if we are aware of anything like that," Mr Bakare said. He promised to return to this reporter with the ICPC's official position. However, he did not revert as promised. To avoid tracing the transactions to the lawmakers, the committee one of its officials to coordinate the flow of money through numerous accounts, making tracking almost impossible. This has complicated PREMIUM TIMES' efforts to confirm compliance with the directive or the amounts paid into the accounts. The investigation revealed that using multiple bank accounts collected through proxies reduces the chances of transferring the money to any specific account. Many vice-chancellors appear more reluctant this time, with several sources expressing concerns about the lawmakers' unending demands for money. In some instances, the vice-chancellors have had to contend with multiple standing committees of the Senate and the House and several ad hoc committees.

Earlier on Wednesday, the vice-chancellors met with the Senate Committee on Tertiary Institutions and TETFund. However, the meeting was reportedly less confrontational than in the House. Last year, this paper reported that lawmakers demanded N5 million from universities to pass the 2024 budget. However, the current demand of N8 million appears to have further strained the vice-chancellors. The Vice-Chancellor of the Federal University of Gusau, Muazu Gusau, appears to have become a particular target for lawmakers. During the 16 January meeting, the lawmakers threatened to "deal with" Mr Gusau for being "stubborn." Sources said the lawmakers criticized Mr Gusau for defying their demands and accused him of not cooperating like other vice-chancellors. "It is unclear what Mr Gusau has done to incur the lawmakers' wrath, but it seems he has refused to comply with their demands. Perhaps he has rejected previous requests from the lawmakers, as they are always demanding money," a source, who requested anonymity, said. The lawmakers reportedly did not specify how they planned to "deal with" Mr Gusau. However, they have a history of using the threat of probes to ensure compliance.



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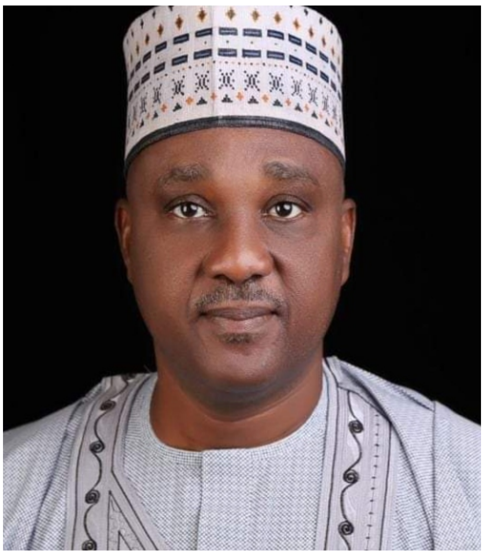
When PREMIUM TIMES contacted Mr Fulata, the chairman of the House Committee on University Education, he did not return calls or messages seeking his comments on the allegations.

Amidst the ongoing demands for bribes, Nigerian universities are struggling with chronic underfunding by the government. Over the years, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has sought to compel the government through strikes to fund universities properly, but the issues remain unresolved. In 2009, the federal government agreed to invest N1.5 trillion in university funding following negotiations with ASUU. However, despite several rounds of renegotiation, the government has consistently reneged on this agreement. Since then, the number of federally-owned universities has increased significantly, but the budgetary allocation for education has remained meagre, often covering only personnel costs. Infrastructure development largely relies on the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), which is now under growing pressure from lawmakers.



Last year, the two TETFUND committees in the House and Senate launched a probe requiring all heads of tertiary institutions to seek approval before undertaking projects. The committees eventually backed down following pushback from the vice-chancellors and a PREMIUM TIMES report exposing the scheme. Despite these challenges, vice-chancellors endure persistent harassment and extortion from lawmakers while struggling to meet their institutions' funding needs.

Meanwhile the Nigerian Senate has deployed "silence" as its official strategy in response to the corruption scandal exposed by a recent PREMIUM TIMES investigation, which revealed an "extortion scheme" created by some lawmakers to fleece universities of their meagre income. On Saturday, PREMIUM TIMES published a report detailing how members of the Senate Committee on Tertiary Institutions and TETFUND, along with their counterparts in the House Committee on University Education, demanded ₦8 million from each university as a condition for passing their 2025 budget proposals. Following the report, Nigerians on social media have called for thorough investigations by anti-graft agencies. However, the Senate has opted to remain silent in the face of the scandal.

On Monday, PREMIUM TIMES contacted the spokespersons of both chambers to obtain their official positions. The spokesperson of the Senate, Yemi Adaramodu, initially acknowledged a text message sent to his phone and promised to provide an official response. He has, however, failed to keep his promise as he ignored several reminders sent to him. The spokesperson of the House, Akin Rotimi, did not respond to requests for comments on Monday but on Wednesday, he released a statement that failed to address the issues raised in the report. In the statement, the House appeared to have cleared the committees without even investigating the allegations. The Senate leadership's silence is widely perceived as a sign of complicity, particularly given that past leaderships of the National Assembly had been accused of receiving kickbacks from some committee chairpersons. In the past, the leadership of both chambers had faced allegation of rewarding allies with committee appointments. Bob

Solomon, a member of the House from Rivers State, was questioned by some new members on how certain lawmakers secured key committee positions despite lacking legislative experience. Additionally, there has been a proliferation of committees in both chambers, widely believed to be a means of rewarding loyalists and creating "money for the boys." In the current Assembly, there are over 150 standing committees in the House, following the splitting of some committees to accommodate more loyalists.

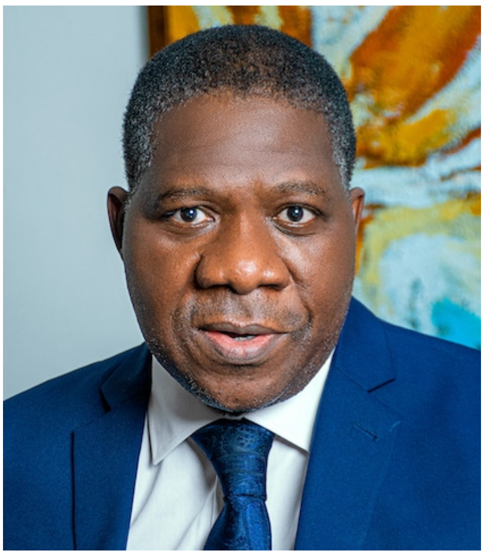
Earlier in January, PREMIUM TIMES published a report on the allocation of ₦10 billion for rent and furniture for the presiding officers of the National Assembly by the Ministry of the FCT. The story generated public outrage, with Nigerians questioning the "outrageous" allocation and calling for action. However, the National Assembly completely ignored the report and refused to comment on it. Beyond the need for official statements, there is an urgent need for the institution to investigate the committees and take appropriate action. Meanwhile, the National Assembly has become notorious for sweeping allegations involving its members and committees under the carpet.

Recently, there were some bribery allegations made by the CEO of Binance, Richard Teng.

In 2023, PREMIUM TIMES an ad hoc committee of the House that was tasked with probing job racketeering but ended up extorting MDAs. The report provided details of the bank account into which the money was paid, the bureau de change entity used, and the proxy who collected the funds. Following the publication, the House, through Mr Rotimi, promised to investigate the matter. However, no action has been taken to date.

Last year, PREMIUM TIMES also published a report on how some committees tried to extort tertiary institutions through the TETFUND allocation. The committees backed down after the report.

In a sudden twist the Vice-Chancellor of Federal University, Gusau, Prof. Muazu Abubakar, has exonerated members of the House of Representatives Committee on University Education over alleged request for N480 million as a condition for passing federal universities' 2025 budgets. In a letter addressed to the Chairman of the committee, Rep. Abubakar Fulata (APC-Jigawa) dated Jan. 27, Abubakar faulted the media reports alleging that the lawmakers were pressuring some university vice-chancellors to pay the said amount.



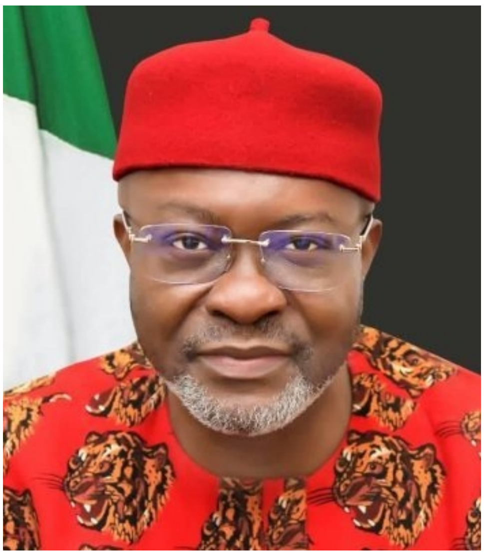
The vice-chancellor, who personally signed the letter, said that in the said publication, it was alleged that lawmakers were using intimidation and threats to force the heads of universities to pay N8 million each to approve their allocations in the 2025 budget. He said that the lawmakers were alleged in the report to be targeting a 'stubborn vice-chancellor' who appeared to be him. Abubakar said that his initial intention was to ignore the write-up in its entirety, but on a closer reflection, he deemed it necessary to respond to the issues raised there. This, he said, was to foreclose any possibility of such "jaundiced, misleading and vexatious insinuations being taken for the truth by otherwise discerning members of the National Assembly. "The attention of the VC, Federal University, Gusau, has been drawn to a trending online news item as captioned "Investigation: Nigerian lawmakers demand N480 million from universities to approve 2025 budget. "We make bold to say that no member of the university team at the budget defence is a party to the information concocted and put out in the media space. "We, therefore, urge you, the chairman and members of your honourable committee, to discountenance the malicious and mischievous write-up which has a proclivity towards sensational headlines and destructive journalism.

"Mr Chairman, the Governing Council, the vice-chancellor and indeed, the management and Senate We pledge to work assiduously to further cement such relationship in the interest of the overall development of the university and furtherance of tertiary education in Nigeria," he said. The vice-chancellor described the budget defence session with the committee as 'robust, friendly and convivial session'. The chairman of the committee had, earlier at a news conference, dismissed the media report, saying that the allegation was designed to undermine the efforts of the committee to improve the standard of education in the country. Fulata said that his reaction to the allegation was to avoid misleading the general public about the activities of the committee and the 10th House of Representatives. He said that it was ridiculous for anyone or group to suggest that lawmakers were demanding for a "kobo" as a condition for approving budget proposals.

Many Nigerians have started reacting to this allegations and scam against the National Assemly. Engr. Shodipe Adefepa a civil Engineer

with Chrome Line Construction company berated the National Assembly Members over the allegation describing them as the real problem of Nigeria. According to him some members of the National Assembly whether you call them Senators or Honourable Members are the most unpatriotic persons we have in Nigeria. They parade themselves as honourable members yet there is nothing honourable about them. They are the most dishonorable persons we have on planet earth. My brother to be frank with you these allegations are not new. It is their stock in trade. They are in the National Assembly to represent themselves and their pocket, they are not representing Nigerians. It is not today we have been hearing about bribery and corruption allegations against them. You remember few years ago this same allegation was brought against them with glaring evidence and they denied until the ICPC waded in but very unfortunately tiill date Nigerians did not hear anything about the outcome of the so called investigation. As usual the whole issue was covered up and swept under the carpet. Let me give you another recent example the NNPCL forensic probe initiated by the National Assembly by a joint committee of both the senate and the House, the one that Senator Bamidele Opeyemi was chairing. What happened at the end it was unilaterally suspended by the Chairman for whatever reason ant till date nothing was heard about it again. After wasting tax payers' money in the name of conducting public hearing and investigation nothing happened. Many waters must have passed under the bridge and Mele Kyari and his team escape the hammer. That one has entered voice mail. Take a retrospective look you are a journalist and see whether you can count the number of probes and investigation conducted by the National Assembly that saw the light of the day. They will just use our mandate to make noise to make Nigerians think they are serious and they will go behind the stage to settle themselves. So who is fooling who? They are only fooling themselves and not Nigerians because we know their antics. This may sound funny but it is the reality and what is going on. The kind of people we have there in the National Assembly are the same products of the rotten system so what do we expect.'

Also speaking on the allegations against the lawmakers, a lawyer and human right activist, Barr. Ikelonwu Abaribe decried the incessant accusation of the National Assembly members describing it as a sore throat in the mouth. According to him It is unfortunate that Nigeria is the only country where people elected to represent the people go in there steal what belong to the people. It is a very sad scenario that our own so called representative go into the National Assembly to legislate for themselves. Look at all the challenges the average Nigerian is going through from hunger, unemployment, kidnappings, economic crisis and so on and so forth yet these people are not concerned about what we are going through. Let me emphasize on the hunger in the land that is causing chaos across the country. What has the lawmakers done to prevail on the government to make the situation better. What we see is a senate president who told a bemused world that while Nigerians are going on hunger protest they will be in their homes enjoying themselves and watching the protest on Television. These are the kind of lawmakers we have, self-aggrandizers whose interest is their belly and what they can get from the system. You can see the government of the day tasking the poor daily through different increment and taxes ranging from electricity, toll gates, petroleum, telecommunications and several others yet our so called lawmakers watch in derision instead of speaking out for the masses they claim to represent.

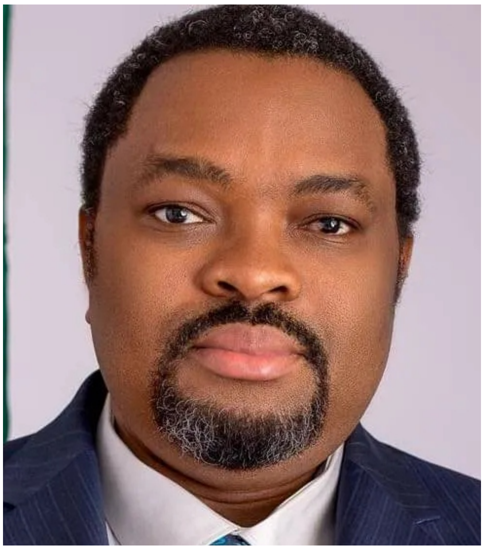


A female medical Doctor, Dr. Caroline Amagade who work in a private hospital in Abuja also voiced her concern on the issue of the bribery allegations against the lawmakers has this to say' You journalist will not allow people to rest, every time you will be asking us different questions yet we don't see any result. It is even getting worse. Most of the time I hate to talk about the National Assembly because the kind of characters we have there are band of thieves. It is like the story of Alibaba and the forty thieves you are a journalist and I am sure you have read the book. They sit there in the chambers collecting all kinds of allowances in the name of making laws for our people but all we see is hike in the cost of everything thereby making life difficult for the average man. Then you ask yourself what kind of laws are they making for Nigerians. As you can see the cost of living is skyrocketing every day, go to the market you will see for yourself, even essential social services are beyond the reach of the average Nigerian. You can see the way the government is increase tariffs every

second. They keep milking us every day and we say we have lawmakers who are making laws for us. What laws have they made since this administration came on board that is impacting positively on the lives of Nigerians. If they have been conducting their oversight functions with integrity, we will not be having abandon projects here and there across the country. All they do is collecting humongous salaries and allowance at the expenses of the very Nigerians they claim to be representing. During budget defense sessions you need to see what they do. The intimidate Ministers and Heads of MDAs and coerce them into endorsing padded budgets. They use the mandate and power of the people to advance their personal and selfish interest. Why do you think they go into close sessions during budget defense? And shut you journalist out? That is where they discuss their interest and percentages with the Head of MDA. Most of these lawmakers are corrupt people and they have been corrupting the system. I believe that the N480 million accusation against them is true. They are telling the rest of us that it is a mere blackmail. There is no smoke without fire, they are capable of doing worse.'.

Meanwhile the Human and Environmental Development Agenda (HEDA Resource Centre) has urged the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) to immediately commence a thorough investigation into the allegation of N480 Million bribe demand against some members of the National Assembly. This is as a result of the allegation that senators and members of the House of Representatives, operating through the Senate Committee on Tertiary Education and TETFund, and the House Committee on University Education, demanded money from Vice-Chancellors of Federal Universities to approve their 2025 budget allocations. Surprised at the allegation, the House of Representatives urged anyone with credible evidence regarding the alleged N480 million bribery demand to present it to the relevant authorities, including the House Committee on Ethics and Privileges or anti-corruption agencies such as the ICPC for independent investigation. But HEDA's Chairman, Olanrewaju Suraju, in a statement strongly condemned the alleged bribe demand. He decried that the allegation was deeply disturbing, as it not only violated ethical and legal standards but also entrenched corruption in Nigeria's education sector, which is already plagued by chronic underfunding and administrative challenges. Suraju said:

"It is unacceptable that university administrators, who are entrusted with managing the country's citadels of learning, are being subjected to intimidation and coercion by lawmakers who should be championing transparency and accountability. "We call on the EFCC and the ICPC to immediately commence a thorough investigation into this matter. The lawmakers allegedly involved must be identified, investigated, and, if found guilty, prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Corruption, particularly in the education sector, undermines national development, weakens institutions, and erodes public trust in governance." Furthermore, the HEDA boss urged President Bola Tinubu and the leadership of the National Assembly to take decisive action in addressing the allegation. He said: "The National Assembly must not become a breeding ground for corruption; rather, it should uphold the principles of integrity and good governance. "If these allegations, which are becoming a recurring decimal after similar allegations of extortion were levelled against the legislators, are confirmed, disciplinary measures must be taken against those responsible to serve as a deterrent to others who may seek to exploit their positions for personal gain."



"We call on all stakeholders, including civil society organizations, the media, the general public, and particularly the management of the higher institutions to resist and expose corruption wherever it is found. Our education sector deserves better, and those entrusted with making policies should be held accountable for their actions," Suraju said.

He stated that HEDA remains committed to advocating for transparency, good governance, and accountability in Nigeria.

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In a recent revelation some members of the Senate Committee on Tertiary Institutions and TETFUND have confirmed receiving $1,000 as "appreciation money" amid allegations that the National Assembly extorted federal universities to approve their 2025 budgets. Speaking to Premium Times, the lawmakers admitted to receiving the money in envelopes but claimed they were unaware of its source until the report exposed the scheme. Earlier, an investigation revealed that the Senate and House committees on tertiary education had demanded ₦8 million from each federal university, coercing vice-chancellors into paying a total of ₦480 million. Those who refused were reportedly threatened with political consequences. A senator from the committee, who spoke anonymously, said most members were kept in the dark about the scheme, with only chairpersons, deputies, and clerks controlling operations. "The chairpersons, deputies, and clerks run many committees. Sometimes, we don't even know who the committee members are," the lawmaker said. The report further exposed how lawmakers allegedly extorted ₦528 million from 66 polytechnics and colleges of education, demanding payments in exchange for passing their budgets. Meetings were held in January, where the Senate and House committees allegedly instructed rectors and provosts to pay ₦8 million per institution, with payments made in cash to avoid traceability. Despite these revelations, the National Assembly has denied the allegations. However, sources indicate that lawmakers are now attempting to discredit the investigation while using legislative threats to silence vice-chancellors. In response to the allegations, Hassan Fulata, Chairman of the House Committee on University Education, accused the Vice-Chancellor of the Federal University Gusau, Abubakar Gusau, of insubordination for allegedly denying lawmakers access to the institution. However, this claim only surfaced after the corruption report was published. As pressure mounts, some officials have resorted

to pledging loyalty to lawmakers, fearing retaliation through legislative means.

In a related revelation Binance executive Gambaryan accused some lawmakers of demanding $150m bribe. The Head of Financial Crime Compliance at cryptocurrency firm, Binance, Tigran Gambaryan, who spent eight months in a Nigerian detention facility for alleged corruption, has identified three Nigerian lawmakers who allegedly demanded a bribe of $150m from him. Nigerian authorities detained Gambaryan and his colleague, Nadeem Anjarwalla, a 37-year-old British Kenyan who serves as the regional manager for Africa at Binance. Both were charged with money laundering involving $35 million, as initiated by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. Anjarwalla managed to escape from custody on March 22, 2024. However, Gambaryan was released following the intervention of the United States government. While in detention, the Binance boss said some lawmakers in the House of Representatives demanded bribes from him. Taking to his verified X handle, Gambaryan named Philip Agbese, Ginger Onwusibe and Peter Akpanke, all members of the House, as the men who allegedly demanded the huge sum from him. ***Gambaryan's post on X read in part, "The DSS was involved in the House of Representatives matter. We met with them at their office on Friday, January 5, 2024, as a prerequisite to our meeting with the House of Representatives. They alluded to the fact that we had to comply with whatever the House members instructed us to do. "At the House meeting, there were three members present. Two of them were Peter Akpanke and Philip Agbese, both working under the leadership of Ginger Obinna Onwusibe. There was a third House member, but I don't recall his name. "They set up fake cameras and media to make the meeting appear official, but the cameras weren't even plugged in. As you may already know, this ended with them asking for a $150m bribe, paid in cryptocurrency into their personal wallets. A Micky Mouse operation at its best."***

Reacting to the development, however, Agbese, who doubles as the Deputy Spokesman of the House, has called on the Binance boss to support his claims with evidence or face the consequences of his actions. Speaking with PUNCH Online, the Benue lawmaker said, "I am outraged by the false allegations made by Tigran Gambaryan, an executive of the controversial crypto firm

Binance, claiming that I was among those who demanded a $150m bribe from him. "These allegations are false. I was not part of any meeting with any Binance executive regarding money for any purpose. The leadership of the committee took the matter to court, and Binance has already apologized.

"Let it be on record that I am not a member of the Committee on Economic and Financial Crimes. I visited my colleague, Hon Peter Akpanke, in his office, where he was meeting with some visitors about an activity of his committee, with Hon Peter Anakwe, a member of the committee present. We exchanged pleasantries and, in character with my person as an avid pursuer of knowledge, discussed Binance's activities that did not include any demand from anyone. "It was during this visit to the office of Hon Akpanke, with Hon Anekwe present, that he told me they were interfacing with the Binance team from abroad over a referral to their committee. What transpired between the two of them and the Binance executive after I left the office is left to them?"

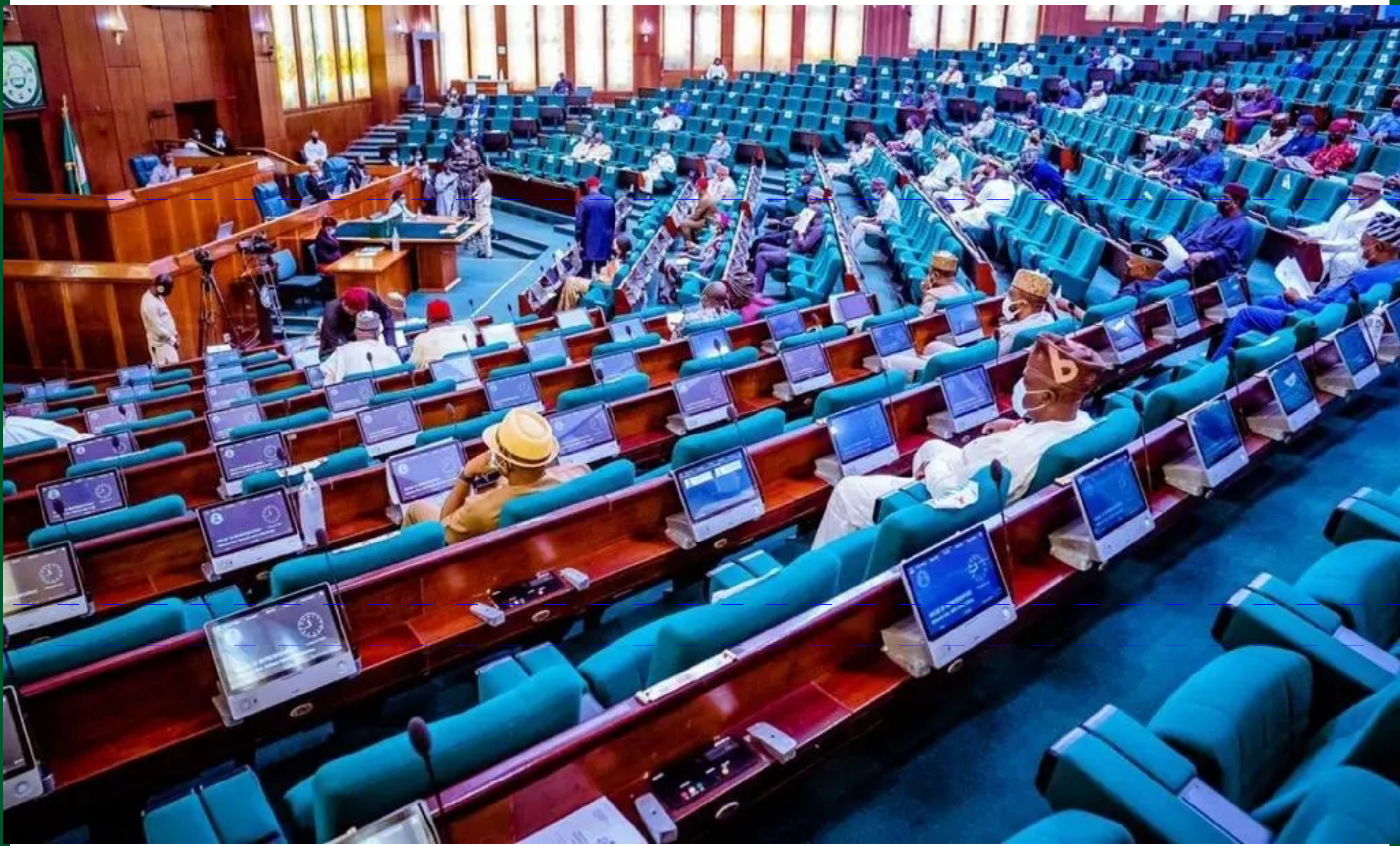
He said he never saw the visitors again after the meeting and did not afterwards attend any meetings with Binance executives, the EFCC or the DSS. "I am aware that when this issue was first raised, the Chairman of the Committee went to court and Binance apologised. So, all inquiries should be directed to the committee, not to Hon. Philip Agbese," he stated.

The lawmaker noted that the world of cryptocurrency is new to him, saying, "I have never used any cryptocurrency as I do not have a crypto wallet anywhere in the world. I could not have asked for funds to be credited to a non-existent wallet. "Gambaryan and his associate, who escaped from prison, should return to the EFCC and defend themselves. Instead of trying to implicate me, they should focus on addressing the allegations against them. "As a consequence of the foregoing, I demand that Tigran Gambaryan publishes any evidence that links Hon Philip Agbese to the issue. The man has spewed many other lies in his report about the government demanding information on opposition elements and other outrageous claims.

"It is unacceptable that university administrators, who are entrusted with managing the country's citadels of learning, are being subjected to intimidation and coercion by lawmakers who should be championing transparency and accountability. "We call on the EFCC and the ICPC to immediately commence a thorough investigation into this matter. The lawmakers allegedly involved must be identified, investigated, and, if found guilty, prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Corruption, particularly in the education sector, undermines national development, weakens institutions, and erodes public trust in governance." Furthermore, the HEDA boss urged President Bola Tinubu and the leadership of the National Assembly to take decisive action in addressing the allegation. He said: "The National Assembly must not become a breeding ground for corruption; rather, it should uphold the principles of integrity and good governance. "If these allegations, which are becoming a recurring decimal after similar allegations of extortion were levelled against the legislators, are confirmed, disciplinary measures must be taken against those responsible to serve as a deterrent to others who may seek to exploit their positions for personal gain."

" I further demand that failing to provide evidence as stated, Tigran Gambaryan must cause a retraction of his malicious claims and publication and apologise to me within the next seven days or face legal action from my lawyers." He added that he has always been a target of foreign forces, noting, "This is not the first allegation against me by a foreign entity. The first was that I worked for the past government and the Armed Forces to promote Nigeria's agenda, which shows the extent of desperation by entities that are interested in undermining public office holders they perceive as nationalistic." Onwusibe, who represents Isiala Ngwa North/Isiala Ngwa South Federal Constituency, Abia State, chairs the House Committee on Anti-Corruption. He declined to comment when contacted by PUNCH Online, saying, "I'm already in court with them on this same issue. I don't need to respond again as I briefed the press on this last year when it happened." Efforts to reach Akpanke for his comments were not fruitful. It is yet to be seen if these allegations and counter allegations are true or false.

In a latest revelation Tigran Gambaryan, the Head of Financial Crime at cryptocurrency firm Binance, has



identified the Nigerian lawmakers who allegedly demanded a $150 million bribe from him. Gambaryan was released in October 2024 after the Federal Government dropped money laundering charges against his company.

He had been in detention for several months before being freed following an intervention by the US government. While in custody, Gambaryan accused certain lawmakers of seeking a bribe from him in exchange for halting his arrest and prosecution. In a statement posted on X on Friday, Gambaryan named the lawmakers as Philip Agbese, the Deputy Spokesperson for the House of Assembly; Ginger Obinna Onwusibe, the Head of the House of Representatives Committee on anti-corruption; and Peter Akpanke, the representative for Obanliku/Obudu/Bekwara. Gambaryan stated, “The DSS was involved in the House of Representatives matter. We met with them at their office on Friday, January 5, 2024, as a prerequisite to our meeting with the House of Representatives. They alluded to the fact that we had to comply with whatever the House members instructed us to do. “At the House meeting, there were three members present. Two of them were Peter Akpanke and Philip Agbese, both working under the leadership of Ginger Obinna Onwusibe. There was a third House member, but I don't recall his name. “They set up fake cameras and media to make the meeting appear official, but the cameras weren't even plugged in. As you may already know, this ended with them asking for a $150 million bribe, paid in cryptocurrency into their personal wallets. A Mickey Mouse operation at its best.” The lawmakers had not responded to the allegation at the time this report was filed.

Meanwhile the Federal Government of Nigeria says it has noted “with concern the outrageous allegations, misinformation, and defamatory statements being disseminated by Tigran Gambaryan, an American personnel of Binance who was recently tried in Nigeria for financial crimes.” Mohammed Idris, Nigeria's Minister of Information and National Orientation who reacted to the claim said, “While the Federal Government of Nigeria is hesitant to engage Mr. Gambaryan, given the high-level diplomatic intervention that resolved his case, we are obliged to set the records straight to stop his falsehoods from gaining grounds. The Minister revealed that, “The first visit by Mr. Gambaryan and his colleagues to Nigeria was discretional on their part and Government was not officially involved. However, when the attention of the Government was called to an alleged bribery demand during that trip an investigation was immediately opened into it though there was no formal complaint by anyone. According to the Minister, “Mr. Gambaryan's second visit to Nigeria was part of a wider probe into the criminal manipulation of the Nigerian currency through peer-to-peer platforms like Binance, but investigators were frustrated by the tactics deployed by Gambaryan and his team. “Mr. Gambaryan was released by the Nigerian government in October 2024 on humanitarian grounds and following a high-level diplomatic intervention that ended with tangible benefits for Nigeria. The government rejected Binance's offer of a $5 million down payment in exchange for Mr. Gambaryan's freedom, in favour of a more beneficial settlement with the American government. “We categorically deny the retaliatory claims made by Mr. Gambaryan against Nigerian officials involved in his case, and we urge the public to disregard these false accusations in their entirety. “It is essential to note that Mr. Gambaryan's allegations are not only unsubstantiated but also lack credibility, given his apparent motive to discredit and intimidate those who ensured he faced justice. “However, we are confident that both the Nigerian and American judicial systems will provide Mr. Gambaryan with a fair opportunity to substantiate his claims in court. Until then, we advise the public to exercise caution and not be swayed by Mr. Gambaryan's unfounded and malicious claims.” Meanwhile in a very bold move Binance top official, Mr Tigran Gambaryan, on Saturday insisted that the $150m bribery allegation he made against three Nigerian lawmakers is factual. He added that his post on Friday was nothing but the truth of what took place in Nigeria. Recall that Gambaryan had taken to the micro blogging site, X, on Friday to name Philip Agbese, Ginger Onwusibe and Peter Akpanke, all members of the House of Representatives as the three prominent Nigerians who demanded a bribe of $150m from him to forestall his arrest and prosecution over money laundering allegations. The claim has since been dismissed by the lawmakers and the Federal Government. Despite the denials, however, Gambaryan posted again on X on Saturday that his claim was factual. “What I shared was factual, based on my personal experiences and conversations with those who have direct knowledge of the events I discussed; information that was shared with both Nigerian and US law enforcements. “So please, allow me to leave this behind and find peace”, he insisted. He said it was the responsibility of law enforcement agents in both Nigeria and the US to see the investigation into the matter through.

He wrote, “I am no longer in law enforcement. The responsibility of seeing this through to a logical conclusion now falls on those still serving in United States and Nigeria. “Many requested that I stay on and provide further commentary on the issues I posted about yesterday (Friday). Here's the hard truth: what I shared was meant to fill in the gaps left by Wired and NPR's reporting. “The reality is that last year was incredibly painful for me and my family. I dedicated my life to fighting crime as a Special Agent with the United States Department of the Treasury and as a compliance professional. It was an honour to serve my country and it was a blessing that they came to my rescue and mobilized the full force of the US Government when I was in need. “Being dragged through court on outrageous, baseless, and trumped-up charges didn't just hurt me, it also brought immense pain to my family. “I don't want to see my kids cry because I'm not around. I don't want to see videos of my 75-year-old mother on television in tears. I don't want to see my wife crying on TV. I want to put this nightmare behind me and move on.”

“Let it be on record that I am not a member of the Committee on Economic and Financial Crimes. I visited my colleague, Hon Peter Akpanke, in his office, where he was meeting with some visitors about an activity of his committee, with Hon Peter Anakwe, a member of the committee present. We exchanged pleasantries and, in character with my person as an avid pursuer of knowledge, discussed Binance's activities that did not include any demand from anyone. “It was during this visit to the office of Hon Akpanke, with Hon Anekwe present, that he told me they were interfacing with the Binance team from abroad over a referral to their committee. What transpired between the two of them and the Binance executive after I left the office is left to them?”

One thing is very clear there is no smoke without fire. In as much as we don't expect that those accused will come out to admit that they did what they were accused of it is pertinent to note that our honourable lawmakers are supposed to exhibit a higher level of responsibility and decorum in the discharge of their responsibility which was bestowed on them by Nigerians who voted for them to represent their interest. All these allegations and accusation of bribery and corruption is not in the best interest of the image of Nigeria as a country. There is every need for our lawmakers to re-invent themselves and do the needful in the interest of our nation and the people they are representing. A word they say is enough for the wise. Nigerians deserves better.