

Covid-19 Scrutiny in ECOWAS Region enmesh with corruption

- Hon. Umeoji

A Nigerian Parliamentarian at the just concluded Extra-Ordinary Session of the ECOWAS Parliament in Lome, Togo, Hon. Chukwuemeka Umeoji has expressed dismay over the high level extortion and corruption across the sub-region while scrutinising the COVID-19 status of travelers at entry points. He said though, the scrutiny which is not only for Parliamentarians but for the entire ECOWAS citizens is appalling and disgusting as people are delayed unnecessarily despite presenting their certificates of immunization and other requirements.

"That type of scrutiny is a hindrance to the spirit of ECOWAS which involves free movement of goods and

services(Persons)."When you have such delay, it is discouraging even for foreign investors to think about coming to West Africa. So, we have to look into it. "In some instances, you are made to part with five or ten dollars before you are attended to or delayed unnecessarily.

"This is the corruption we are talking about that must be discouraged as it is not obtainable in other climes" he said.

The lawmaker however, suggested ways to tackle the menace. "The way forward is to adopt the procedures as it is done in other countries in Europe, once you have your COVID-19 card, everything is captured there, it gives you access to enter the country", he said.

Scanty Remittances of Community Levy worries ECOParl Speaker, Tasks Member Countries...

The Speaker of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Parliament has lamented the slow remittances of Community Levy across the Member States in the Region. The Speaker in his opening remark at the recently concluded 2022 Second Extraordinary Session of the Parliament stated that the Parliament has overtime relied on the resources from a collection of financial contributions across the region through a mechanism of Community levy, however, this collection in recent time according to the Speaker is experiencing decrees in its remittance. "As we all know, Honorable Members, the resources of the Community are largely made up of the collection of financial contributions from the Member States This community levy, which is a rate of 0.5% imposed on goods from non-ECOWAS member states, is, therefore, the main source of financing for ECOWAS. It is supposed to cover between 70 and 90% of the community budget.



"Unfortunately, we are witnessing a low collection rate of the community levy, around 30% in recent years; this has the immediate consequence of reducing ECOWAS' capacity to implement projects and programs, reducing the visibility of the Institutions among the citizens of the community, and slowing down the pace of economic integration.

Concluding, he called on all MPs to intervene in their various countries bearing in mind the importance of the Levy to the

Region. "I, therefore, would like to emphasize, once again, the need for our countries to pay the proceeds of the Community Levy regularly, avoiding the accumulation of arrears, to enable ECOWAS successfully implement its program of activities. I also urge Honourable Members to effectively use our connections with the executive branches of our governments to ensure prompt and timely remittances" The Speaker Concluded.

ECOWAS Parliament Lawmakers at Loggerheads over employment of Staff

The controversy surrounding the recent employment by the Economic Committee of West African States (ECOWAS) is not over yet as lawmakers at its parliament have rejected a motion to present the outcome of the Ad-hoc committee setup to review allegations of nepotism in the exercise. The lawmakers registered their protestation against the committee headed by Nigerian Senator Ali Ndume, at the plenary session of the 2nd Ordinary Session of the ECOWAS Parliament, in Lome, Togo while alleging that the Speaker of Parliament, Sidie Mohamed Tunis constituted the review committee without recourse to parliament.

The lawmakers noted that it was against the rules of parliament for the recruitment exercise to have gone ahead after it was voted to be suspended in the last parliamentary session when allegations of favouritism were raised. Hon Awaji-Inombek Abiante who moved a point of order said that the report of the Ad-hoc Committee as set up by the Bureau was given the mandate to work without recourse to its adoption by the Plenary as such was illegal in its entirety. This position was supported by Nigeria's Senator Smart Adeyemi, who drew the Speaker's attention to the adverse implication of the exercise.

Adeyemi said, "when actions are taken that are not in conformity with the spirit and the content of the documents that are supposed to guide us, I think Mr. Speaker let us accept that something was done wrong. We should be courageous to say that, but for you to say that you prefer the decision that was

not in conformity with the law, as an infringement to the modalities of the Parliament, in fact, the contrary is the case, if we go ahead to accept what is not properly done then the integrity of Parliament itself will be questioned.

"It means that as we are here, somebody can take a decision on our behalf without consulting us. Mr. Speaker with due respect to your position, I personally like you, I respect you, but this decision is not in intent and spirit of the document before us."

Another lawmaker, Hon. Samson Ahi from Ghana argued that the formation of the Ad-hoc Committee was against the rules of parliament.

He spoke. "I just want to find out from you Mr. Speaker, are you saying that with the consultation of the Bureau you constituted an Ad-hoc Committee and after that, you gave them a mandate to work without the approval of the entire house, is that what you are saying? "My understanding is that you can constitute the committee, alright, but it is subject to the approval by the entire members before they can legally work. If you and your Bureau can constitute a committee and they start working without recourse to members before you present your report, then I think there is something wrong with what you have done.

Also, Nigeria's Hon. Abdullahi Kamba noted that the Bureau has no right or powers to take the decision and that

they should have reverted back to Plenary to form an Ad-hoc committee. He said: "Not them as the Bureau forming the Committee, it is wrong, and for that matter, I hope that whatever report the Ad-hoc committee has should not be read here, we should form the committee today so that they can start work."

Responding to the backlash, the Chairman of the Ad-hoc Committee, Senator, Ali Ndume said "I am standing here because of the Ad-hoc committee that was formed and vested with powers to investigate on the matters raised by our high Commissioner from Nigeria and also the First Deputy Speaker on the purported irregularities in recruitment which was suspended. "Our mandate as at that time and now did not lift the ban for the suspension that was the decision that was taken at the Plenary. "On behalf of the other colleagues that undertook this Ad-hoc job, we didn't look for the job. In fact, in my own case, I was in my local government because we were on recess and I was mourning my father; then the Speaker called me to say that there is an issue that came up that is eating the system which was true as at that time and that he needed some members as a committee to immediately look into the matter and report. "

He added that: "We have a mission but now I am embarrassed by the



observation of abnormalities. I am not looking for this job and I am sure our other colleagues are not looking for this job. I am also sure that even if a new committee has to be formed it has to be members of this ECOWAS, and I don't think they are looking for the job either and I don't think any of us cannot do this job.

"I was thinking that members will hear me out or hear the committee or even adopt if there is abnormality because I know the situations where normally if the head of the institution takes a decision that decision is not questioned, but it looked into with the view of ratifying it."

Ndume said: "Distinguish colleagues, I don't want it to put my personal interest but because of the interest of the workers, if not I will not present the report, I will not continue with illegality, you have to decide."

The Speaker of Parliament, Tunis moved that the recruitment process be suspended indefinitely, a decision which seems to have infuriated Senator Edwin Snowe from Liberia who walked out of the plenary in protest of the deferment. Shortly after the session, at a press conference, the Speaker of ECOWAS parliament accused lawmakers in the parliament of mischief and a deliberate misrepresentation of facts in order to garner the sympathy of constituents.

He said: "You will recall that in the last session in Abuja, Honourable Members raised the issue of recruitment in the ECOWAS Parliament, in fact the impression at that time was that there were a lot of malpractices regarding the recruitment exercises. "When I got the information, I decided to set up an independent Ad-hoc Committee, headed by a very senior senator from Nigeria, Ali Ndume, to look at the whole situation and to determine whether in fact Nigerians were marginalized, and whether the process was transparent in line with our Supplementary Act in the staff regulations, and any other issues that may arise from their investigations."

"They submitted their report to me and I called a Bureau meeting. We looked at the report, we adopted it by law and based on the fact that the committee found out that there was nothing wrong

in the recruitment exercises, we decided to go ahead to discuss it, to now consider the Advisory Committee Report. The Advisory Committee is provided for in our Staff Regulations, their responsibility is more or less to look at shortlisting and interviews for staff members. The composition of that particular committee is clearly indicated in our Staff Regulations and how to determine who will be a member is already stated in the Staff Regulations. So it's just a question of looking at the positions, like if they said the Director of Finance is a member, you look at the Parliament who is the Director of Administration you put the person there. It's all clear in the Staff Regulations.

"By law and in line with the Supplementary Act we have done our part, but of course because the issue of recruitment initially came up from the Plenary, I decided that the Chairman should also report to the Plenary for information purposes only, because the Law does not in any way require Plenary to deal with recruitment issues.

"If you look at the recruitment issues, a reference is made to the head of the institution, which is me, I am the Speaker. I am wearing two hats, one as the Head of Institution and the other as Speaker. So as Head of Institutions I can take decisions with regards to that, but then, I can say because colleagues in the Plenary actually raised the issue, I needed to be very clear in my mind and to the public, that in fact the process was transparent and it was all done in line with the Law.

"What I am about to tell you especially for our Colleagues in Nigeria, because this is where there was a huge publicity about malpractices in the ECOWAS Parliament, I want the public to know that the Senator Ali Ndume report which will be given to you clearly exonerated the Parliament that from G to P4 Recruitment as ongoing at the ECOWAS Parliament is transparent and in line with the Staff Regulations and the Supplementary Act, that is very important I want the public especially our Nigerian Public to know, that there were no malpractices. Number two, that Nigerians were not marginalized at all in the whole process.

"As a matter of fact, out of ten positions

from the report now that has been submitted to us by the Advisory Committee, 5 of them went to Nigeria, 1 to Sierra Leone, 1 to Senegal, 1 to Guinea Bissau, 1 to Niger and 1 to Ghana, and it also important and very important to inform the general public that 70% of this new recruitment came from the internal staff, that means people who have already been serving the ECOWAS Parliament," the Speaker explained.

The speaker equally alleged that another reason for the row in parliament was because lawmakers are protesting a new administrative rule that takes away the prerogative to buy air tickets from lawmakers themselves and vested it in administration.

He noted that: "When I came to Parliament in 2018, we used to buy our own tickets then the Parliament would refund. They gave us a threshold for a return ticket, then in 2019, that is before I took over as Speaker, that changed completely because of an audit report which I don't know the details of because by then I was not the Speaker.

"From then, tickets for MPs were not going to be bought by the MPs. When I took over in 2020 that's what I inherited, but then in the last two years I have been Speaker there has always been agitations from Honourable Members that we should go back to what was obtained in 2018, or before I joined Parliament that MPs should be buying their own tickets.

"I have been resisting it for some time and resisting because I am one person that always believes in what the rule says. The reason why I had decided to encourage the idea of MPs buying their own tickets is because I looked at the budget circular, but then from the figures I saw the Parliament was spending more on tickets for MPs, and we were talking about cutting down cost. "It will only be proper for me to toe the line of MPs for me to say let us try again this idea of buying our own tickets and see what will come out of it. But I must make it very clear, these are not just proposals, the law as it stands right now, is that Parliament was supposed to buy it.