

The Freedom of Information Coalition

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PRESS STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE!

The FOI Coalition Marks “Right To Know Day”, Lobbies NASS Members

LAGOS, SEPTEMBER 25, 2003: On the occasion of the “**Right To Know Day**” which will be marked worldwide on September 28, the Freedom of Information Coalition calls on the Nigerian National Assembly to expedite action on the passage of the Freedom of Information Bill currently before the House of Representatives.

The Freedom of Information Coalition, a nationwide coalition of civil society organizations pushing for the enactment of a Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria, notes that transparency and accountability are the baseline for democracy and good governance which itself will ensure development.

The FOI Coalition notes, however, that transparency and accountability cannot be guaranteed under an atmosphere of secrecy and lack of access to government records and information such as hallmark the Nigerian polity.

Members of the FOI Coalition in Nigeria will on September 28, 2003, join its counterparts worldwide to mark the “**Right To Know Day**”, by paying advocacy visits to members of the National Assembly in their respective states to lobby them on the need to sign on the campaign and expedite action on the bill at the National Assembly.

The visitations will be organized in the 18 states of the federation where the FOI Coalition currently has member-organisations and other states where some individual members of the FOI Coalition are able to organize themselves for the purpose.

In each state, a team of representatives of the FOI Coalition member organizations, other groups and persons who may sympathize with the campaign, would visit National Assembly members from that state carrying letters of appeal and other documents on FOI. These would be presented to the Assembly members that they might meet in person or whoever an Assembly members may designate to receive the team on his/her behalf. This may be followed by a few minutes of questions and answers.

...Campaigning for openness and transparency through access to public records and information

The meeting is not expected to last more than twenty minutes at each stop.

The “**Right to Know Day**” is being celebrated for the first time ever this year. It was designated by Freedom of Information organisations from various countries around the world at a meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria last year. It will be marked with a series of coordinated activities around the globe, including awards for “friends” and “enemies” of Freedom of Information.

The Freedom of Information Bill presently before the House of Representatives for consideration and passage was introduced to the House at the inception of the present democratic dispensation in July 1999 by some civil society organizations led by Media Rights Agenda, working in collaboration with some members of the House of Representatives. The bill seeks to provide a legally enforceable right of access to information at the public domain for citizens with the expectations that such a regime will deepen transparency and accountability in the polity.

The Bill underwent its First Reading on February 22, 2000 and the Second Reading came up about a month later, on March 13, 2000. Although the Committee on Information which considered the Bill in detail recommended that it should be passed, at the Third Reading which originally took place in May 2001, the House mandated the Committee on Information to hold a public hearing on the Bill to fulfill one of the procedural requirements and to enable the House to gauge the public attitude towards it.

The public hearing was held on October 3 and 4, 2001. It attracted impressive participation and contributions from members of the society drawn from various walks of life including the academia, labour, the legal profession, civil rights groups, the journalism profession, and other sectors of the society.

Despite the show of public commitment by members of the House, they failed to pass the bill until the legislative tenure came to an end.

The bill has however been re-introduced at the new House of Representatives and has undergone its First and Second Readings. Following the second reading, the Bill has been referred to the House committees on Information, Human Rights, and Judiciary for vetting. The committees are expected to report back to the Committee of the whole House for the third reading and passage of the Bill.

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