

**SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. GOODLUCK EBELE JONATHAN
GCON VICE PRESIDENT, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA, AT THE
OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 1ST FORUM OF THE LAUREATES OF THE
NIGERIAN NATIONAL ORDER OF MERIT (NNOM) HELD AT THE NNMA
AUDITORIUM, MERIT HOUSE, MAITAMA, ABUJA, ON 4TH DECEMBER,
2007**

PROTOCOL,

I am indeed highly honoured and delighted to be part of this epoch-making event which marks the convening of the 1st Forum of the Laureates of the Nigerian National Order of Merit (NNOM).

2. The Nigerian National Merit Award (NNMA) was established by Government through Act No.53 of 1979. Its primary objective was to confer the Nigerian National Merit Award, a cash prize, and a Medal on deserving Nigerian citizens who, through intellectual and academic attainments, have contributed to national and global development. The award is made in four broad areas viz:

- (i) Science;
- (ii) Medicine;

- (iii) Engineering/Technology and,
- (iv) The Humanities, Arts & Culture and any other field of human endeavour.

3. The Act was amended by Act No.96 of 1992 which recognized the NNMA as an “*Order of Dignity*” which entitles the recipient to use the designation “*Nigerian National Order Merit*” (NNOM) after his or her name and enjoy “*such other privileges as are enjoyed by recipients of high levels of NATIONAL Honours*”.

4. It is highly delightful to note that, since its inception over twenty-eight (28) years ago, the Nigerian National Merit Award, through the meticulous work of its successive Governing Boards and its four Committees of Assessors, has successfully identified and selected for the award, 54 distinguished Nigerian intellectuals, all of which have been wisely and publicly acknowledged as men and women of great diligence and integrity. I am made to understand that the Award has, today, attained

such a level of regional and global recognition that it is now keenly contested for by Nigerian citizens, both at home and in diaspora. This is how it should be. The pursuit of excellence is the best guarantor of greatness and as a government we are fully aware of the implication of not protecting and projecting our brightest and best.

5. I heartily congratulate all of you, the worthy recipients of this highly coveted national award for intellectual and academic excellence. By your achievements, you have contributed to be a beacon of hope that Nigeria will one day regain its position as a global leader in research and development. It is also my hope that you will, from now on actively reach out to and collaborate with other Nigerian public and private sector researchers. This way we can develop the critical mass of researchers needed to propel our dear nation into the league of developed and industrialized nations by the Year 2020. In this regard, I urge your Board to continue

the dialogue and cooperation which you have initiated with relevant Federal Ministries and Parastatals, the Universities, National Academies and the Private Sector.

6. Let me also congratulate the past and present members of the Governing Board as well as the Committee of Assessors of the NNMA. Your diligent and unwavering adherence to the principles of fair play has earned for the NNMA a place of pride among global and national organizations of similar standing. I urge the Governing Board to continue to steer the affairs of the NNMA with the same level of diligence and transparency that has uniquely made the Award a national institution that has not been undermined by a tendency towards mediocrity. Our government is committed to promoting excellence and I want to assure you distinguished Laureates that we will not lower our guard in this regard.

7. The convening of this 1st Forum of the Laureates of the Nigerian National Order of Merit cannot have come at

a better time than now when our Government is keenly promoting the development of home grown solutions to our pressing national problems. The theme of the Forum, *“Promoting Intellectual Excellency and Innovation for National Development”* is, therefore, very appropriate. Since your “Congregation” is made up of reputable specialists in virtually all fields of learning, I have no doubt that you will, at the end of this subsequent Forum, assist the Government by articulating viable and cost-effective solutions to critical national problems. In this regard, we look forward to receiving the communiqué as well as the published Proceedings of your discussions which, I have no doubt, will proffer solutions to some of the critical infrastructural and development programme. I assure you that the good ideas generated by you will certainly be utilized in policy decision-making as well as in the resolution of some salient issues of national interest.

8. I wish to assure you that government will continue to give full support to your intellectual endeavours and assist you with the facilities and funds needed to make the Forum an annual platform for bringing together Nigerian intellectuals, government ministries and parastatals as well as the private sector. I wish to use this opportunity to call on the private sector to join hands with government in its effort aimed at harnessing the wealth of experience of these noble and talented Nigerians in our determination to solve the socio-political and economic problems confronting us as a Nation. The private sector I understand can do this by way of endowment.

9. Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to state that in view of the success story so far recorded by the Board of the NNMA, as enumerated by the Chairman, it is my pleasure to:

- ✚ Request the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, in his capacity as the Chief Host of the Forum, to continue to provide full support for the annual convening of the Forum of the Laureates of the NNOM;
- ✚ Direct that steps be taken to give a more critical look at the budgetary and endowment needs of the NNMA with effect from 2008 especially with regards to encouraging the private sector to take more than a passing interest in the support of excellence;
- ✚ Direct that administrative steps be taken expeditiously to address and resolve the issue of status and equivalence of the NNOM; and
- ✚ Direct the Board of the NNMA and the Federal ministry of Science & Technology and other relevant Ministries to work together to propose a viable scheme for the joint management and administration

of the proposed “Science and Technology Research & Development Fund.”

10. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my singular honour and privilege therefore to now declare this Forum open and I wish you all very happy deliberations.

11. I thank you for your attention.