



## **COVID-19: DECONGESTION OF NIGERIAN PRISONS LAWYERS ALERT TO ESTABLISH IMPLEMENTATION MONITORING TEAMS**

Following the resolve of the Federal Government of Nigeria to decongest Correctional Centres in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lawyers Alert will along side like-minded CSOs, engage the Presidential Committee for the Decongestion of the Correctional Centres, Federal and State Attorneys General, including Chief Judges and State Governors in ensuring the prompt implementation of this policy.

Prisoners to benefit from this decision according to the Attorney General of the Federation, Abubakar Malami SAN, are those in Correctional Service Centres for a period above ten years, inmates for a longer period without any documentation, those that have the option of fine, those on holding charges in respect of offences-based Magistrate Orders, among others.

Lawyers Alert notes that out of the over 74,000 inmates in Nigerian prisons, over 52,000 are innocent and are awaiting trial, which accounts for over 70% inmates who are presumed innocent by our constitution. The decision by the Federal Government to let them on bail is therefore not only legal, but just, equitable and fair.

Lawyers Alert notes that the Federal Government resolve appears to be a direct response to civil society groups' demands and this exhibits responsiveness of government to citizens and its accountability to the people. We commend the federal government on this.

Lawyers Alert is, however, worried about the implementation of this decision given the sometimes-slow pace of execution of such directives. Our anxiety is hinged on the fact that time is a luxury given the spread of the virus and its likely effect in congested spaces like our prisons. To this end, LA calls upon all Solicitors General of States in the country, including the Attorneys General, who are the prosecuting officers, to, as

a matter of urgency, apply to their various High Courts for the release of awaiting trial prisoners on bail who fits into the class of inmates as specified.

Lawyers Alert notes that we have about 244 Correctional centers in the country and waiting for Chief Justices or Governors to visit these centers towards implementing this directive may not yield the desired result. This accounts for our suggestion that State Attorney Generals file blanket Applications before State High Courts for their bail and release. This will be the smartest thing to do. Lawyers Alert will setup a monitoring team alongside other like-minded CSOs to gauge government compliance with its own policy and give Nigerians periodic progress reports. We urge the Attorney General of the Federation to immediately cascade government's intention and directives to State Attorneys General on this issue.

Once again, we commend the Federal Government for this initiative. We are confident that Nigeria, with lessons learnt from the Ebola pandemic, will be able to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 to the barest minimum.

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