

African Heritage Institution
Big Ideas Podium
WELCOME REMARKS (MAY16, 2019)

Honorable and distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen!

I am very delighted that you are here with us for today's Big Ideas Podium. Once again, your presence elevates and justifies the very high importance we place on today's topic. You are highly welcome!

Human rights are basically the rights that each of us has as human beings – including, Rights To: Life; Equality; Freedom from Discrimination; Security of Person; Equality before the Law.

All human beings have rights to economic, social and cultural rights. Basically, the rights to what the American founding fathers referred to in their Declaration of Independence from Britain as the “right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”

Human rights are non-negotiable since they are beyond the discretion of governments to take or give. When they are denied, those responsible are human rights violators.

The general universality of these principles is strongly established with the vast majority of countries signing off on these agreements as state parties, which makes them binding. Still, there remains a lingering problem – way too many states remain non-compliant across a wide range of issue areas.

All around the world, human rights are violated very often by so many governments, cultures and individuals that many people have come to regard human rights violations as normal.

In Africa, many countries – such as Namibia, Rwanda, and South Africa – are way ahead of laggards such as Nigeria.

Honorable and distinguished guests, human rights are fundamental for sustained development. When human rights are systemically denied over a period, the basis for societal unity, prosperity and peace are usually hindered. The resulting tensions and communal dissonance are usually fertile grounds for social dysfunctions, conflict, or even war.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, the impact of how badly our country is doing was recently further driven home for me. Last week, I received a call from a South African friend and former colleague. He asked that I should look at Twitter to see what a former student and countryman had written for public consumption. The former student wrote as follows on his twitter handle:

“Many years ago, I left Nigeria in search of greener pastures. 7 yrs later: 2 fully sponsored degrees in the bag (An MA and a PhD). Looking back, it has been the best decision I ever took. I am grateful for the opportunity to tell the story. If you can, RUN before Ngr kills you!”

Basically, Nigerians are driven by systemic human rights violations and the associated bad governance to run away from their country in droves – often risking destitution, human trafficking and slavery, and drowning in the high seas.

- The police are regularly accused of human rights violations – torture, unlawful killings, ill-treatment of citizens, and enforced disappearances.
- The Nigerian justice system is severely under-resourced and prone with interminable delays. Nigerian prisons are permanently overcrowded – with most inmates kept as pre-trial detainees.
- In Nigeria, defenders of human rights and journalists often face routine intimidation and harassment.

- Violence against women in homes and out on the streets are widespread
- Many children are largely unprotected from domestic and public violence;
- Over the years, hundreds of thousands of people have been forcibly evicted from their homes and shops across the country with no compensation.

As always, the African Heritage Institution expects today's event to be informative and insightful. I have no doubts that it will enrich our understanding of human rights and how we fit into it as consumers of government policies, and how we should fit into it as citizens of Nigeria.

On behalf of the African Heritage Institution I wish us all meaningful and robust dialogue this morning.

You are truly welcome! Nno nu!

Prof. Ufo Okeke-Uzodike
Executive Director