

# ACTION GROUP ON FREE CIVIC SPACE

## #ENDSARS PROTESTS 2020: ONE YEAR AFTER

October 20, 2021

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

The **Action Group on Free Civic Space (AGFCS)** once again condemns in very strong terms the brutal attacks launched on thousands of unarmed young protestors demonstrating against police brutality during the October 2020 #ENDSARS protests, particularly at the Lekki Tollgate Plaza in Lagos on the dreadful night of October 20, 2020. Indeed, forensic experts engaged at **the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on Police Brutality** have confirmed that live military-grade bullets were fired at protestors and the cartridge casing obtained from the Lekki Tollgate are of the same calibre as the Nigerian Army's live ammunition. What is most worrying is that one year later, despite overwhelming evidence gathered from earlier on-ground investigations, video footage, eyewitness testimonies, hospital reports, and most recently forensic reports that Nigerian security forces opened fire on protestors, no one has been held accountable. We hereby demand the immediate arrest and speedy prosecution of every person responsible for perpetrating the horrid crime of police brutality in Nigeria and most importantly, the murderous attacks of October 20, 2020, now referred to as the Lekki Tollgate Massacre.

A year ago today, we witnessed the eruption of one of the most powerful mass movements in the history of our nation – despite the turbulent start of last year which was marked by the coronavirus pandemic, our country, confronted head-on, another pandemic within the coronavirus pandemic - the pervasive menace of police brutality mostly perpetrated by the disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit of the Nigeria Police Force. First mobilised through social media, the #EndSARS protests shook major cities in the country for days in October until the demonstrations were murderously aborted when unknown soldiers opened live fire on peaceful protestors at the Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos State – a day we will never forget!

The National Executive Council (NEC) had in the wake of the violent dispersal of peaceful protestors in 2020 directed states to constitute judicial panels of Inquiry to investigate complaints against SARS and other police units. However, the spate of events that have assaulted public consciousness since the demise of the protests in 2020 challenges the sincerity of Nigerian government's promises to address the legitimate demands of Nigerian youths as per, initiate far-reaching reforms addressing police brutality and other ingrained structural problems in the security sector, and engage in constructive dialogue with citizens to find lasting solutions to other social injustices prevalent in the country.

For instance, security operatives have continued to criminalise and brutalise protestors, engage in extra-judicial killings and offensive shoot-on-sight rhetoric despite the passionate marches against police brutality last year. In similar context is the matter of the Judicial Panel of inquiries constituted in the aftermath of the #ENDSARS protests, despite the conclusion of panel proceedings across 28 states in the country bar Lagos State and submission of recommendations to the Federal Executive Council and state governments, nothing tangible been done to implement the recommendations of the panel reports – consequently, compensations due to many victims of police brutality have remained unpaid with guilty officers like James Nwafor and Ugochukwu Ozuode amongst other security operatives indicted for their legacies of cruelty at the various panels, still roaming free, unaccountable for their many crimes against humanity.

If there was anything beyond the nauseating horror of police violence that the flood of protests exposed last year, it is indeed the frightening reality that constitutionally protected rights and civil liberties once enjoyed by Nigerians have deteriorated to the lowest points. As of today, the digital database - [www.closingspaces.org](http://www.closingspaces.org) – records an alarming number of 435 incidents of crackdowns on civic actors and Nigeria's civic space with vicious attacks directed at freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and most significantly in recent times, media and digital rights.

Furthermore, preliminary findings from *The Security Playbook*, a soon-to-be-released report of the AGFCS, reveal that we have now progressed into a dangerous era of digital unfreedom unmatched by any period in the history of our democratic journey as a country. This much we have seen with consistent censorship of internet and media freedoms in the country, the unconstitutional ban of

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Twitter and many draconian policies aimed at gagging the press. Perhaps, a more troubling knowledge is the fact that Nigeria has now become a surveillance state judging from its misuse of digital laws, technologies, and importation of sophisticated hacking tools to arbitrarily intercept communications of targeted civic actors, illegally monitor opposition voices in government, silence dissent and, generally restrict people's right of free expression and access to information, especially on cyberspaces.

At this juncture, the AGFCS will like to remind the Nigerian government that democratic freedoms are not gifts bestowed to people by illiberal state actors but fundamental rights guaranteed to every citizen under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, as amended. Accordingly, the Nigerian government must recommit to its sacred trust of duty by upholding the rights, dignity, freedoms and well-being of every Nigerian above all parochial interests. Finally, the AGFCS continues to stand in firm solidarity with victims and survivors of police brutality and other heinous crimes against humanity in Nigeria and once again urge the Nigerian government to seize the moment of this significant day to:

- Divorce itself from the undemocratic and despotic inclination to target and oppress individuals, activists, dissenting voices and civil society when they speak up, advocate for accountability from government or organise for lawful demonstrations.
- Fulfil its promises to citizens by bringing to book all erring security officers indicted at the various Judicial Commissions of Inquiry
- Restore hope in victims of police brutality by fully implementing the recommendations for compensation submitted by all Panels of Inquiry set up in the country
- Engage in dialogue with all aggrieved parties and all stakeholders to chart a new path to resolve the insecurity challenges and ethnic discontent that ails the country
- Release all #ENDSARS protestors still unlawfully imprisoned for daring to challenge an oppressive status quo
- Unconditionally lift the suspension of Twitter in Nigeria and commit to opening up space for citizens to participate in governance and engage in constructive dialogue

## SIGNATORIES

1. BUILDING BLOCKS FOR PEACE FOUNDATION
2. ENTREPRENEURSHIP INITIATIVE FOR AFRICAN YOUTHS
3. YOUTHS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY CENTRE
4. SPACES FOR CHANGE
5. FOUNDATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS, ADVOCACY & DEVELOPMENT
6. SBM INTELLIGENCE
7. ACE & VANGUARD LEGAL PRACTITIONERS
8. RULE OF LAW AND ACCOUNTABILITY ADVOCACY CENTRE
9. BRAIN BUILDERS YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE
10. NOPRIN FOUNDATION
11. WORLD IMPACT DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION
12. ELIXIR TRUST FOUNDATION
13. VISION SPRINGS INITIATIVES
14. PUBLIC ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECTS
15. CENTRE FOR ADVANCEMENT OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS
16. ISLAMIC INITIATIVES FOR HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION
17. ERITAI FOUNDATION
18. RURAL AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES