

Speech: Queen at 91 an inspiration for UK and Ghana

QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY PARTY SPEECH, Thursday 1 June 2017

Your Excellency Mr President,

Your Excellency former President of the Republic, John Agyemang Kufuor.

Please allow me also to mention His Excellency John Dramani Mahama who sent a kind message regretting not being able to join us but who I would like personally to thank for our extremely close working relationship during the first 2 ½ years of my posting here.

Likewise, we are sad that His Excellency Jerry John Rawlings could not join us this evening but we are honoured to have his whole family join us.

Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament, Mr Deputy Speaker and Mr Minority Leader

Your Excellencies and colleagues from the Diplomatic Corps

Religious leaders, with a particularly warm welcome to the Chief Imam through whom we wish Ramadan Mubarak to all our Muslim guests, with thanks to them for breaking their fast today with us here this evening.

Traditional leaders, with warm greetings to the Okyenhene, to Togbe Afede, the President of the National House of Chiefs, and the Oblempong of Jamestown who are here with us this evening.

Niimeɪ, Naameɪ, Nananum, Torgbewo, Mamawo

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Guests, Friends one and all and – this may be the last time I ever get to say this in Ghana – All Protocols Observed! You are all very welcome here tonight.

This is my fourth and final Queens Birthday Party in Accra, my first having taken place three weeks after my wife, son and I arrived in May 2014, and this last one comes just three weeks before we leave Ghana at the end of our posting.

At my first Queen's Birthday Party hardly anyone listened to my speech – partly because most guests were more interested in watching England losing to Uruguay in the World Cup at exactly that same moment – but partly, too, because, yes, I spoke for too long.

So, this time I'll keep it a bit shorter. Or to quote Winston Churchill who once said: "I am about to give a speech. My job is to speak and your job is to listen. But let me know if you finish your job before I do."

As we prepare to leave Ghana, my wife Carolina and I would like to thank all my wonderful British High Commission colleagues and so many Ghanaian friends for their support, friendship, kindness and solidarity through so many good times and ... well, a few tough times too.

I'd also like to thank our kind sponsors who helped make this evening possible, particularly Vodafone, Vitol Upstream Ghana, GE Oil and Gas, Vivo Energy, G4S, Apex Health Insurance, Invest in Africa, Stork, Guinness Ghana Brewery, Blue Skies, Voltic, Labadi Beach Hotel, WARA, McVities, DecoKraft, TT Brothers, Swiss Spirit Hotel and Suites, the Movenpick, Oxford Business Group and Champex wine company. Sincere thanks to all of them.

Thanks, too, to the artists entertaining us this evening – to Jollof Balls, Dark Suburb, Blakk Rasta, Mutombo Da Poet and of course to such a good friend of ours, the Ghanaian international diva superstar, Noella Wiyaala! And if our other artist guests here tonight like Becca, Manifest or Shatta Wale want to jump up on stage later on to join in, they'd be very welcome!

I believe our guest list tonight reflects the fact that our High Commission is profoundly integrated with so many different strands of Ghanaian society – in politics, the civil service, the judiciary, armed forces and police; in sports, music and the arts; in the media and social media; in religious and traditional communities, academia and civil society.

We are extremely proud of those links. Without such links no foreign diplomat can hope really to understand the country they are posted to, or succeed in developing real partnerships.

We are proud, too, that there is so much else that links the UK and Ghana, particularly through people-to-people networks, exemplified by the hundreds of thousands of British citizens of Ghanaian family heritage and by organisations such as GUBA, with their huge celebration of the UK and Ghana this weekend in London.

Working with that diaspora for the benefit of Ghana is a key part of the job of my opposite number, the Ghana High Commissioner in London, and we wish Papa Owusu-Ankomah much luck and success as he takes up that role. Good luck Papa!

Ladies and Gentlemen

We are proud of the work we do here – some of it famously, or infamously, covered in the media, and sometimes highly inaccurately so – but most of what we work on and have achieved together with our Ghanaian partners goes largely unreported.

So, please allow me to mention a few, perhaps lesser known highlights of our work over the last three years.

I recall particularly how our – always politically impartial – election-related assistance last year helped the police, judiciary, electoral commission and civil society prepare for elections which further cemented Ghana's reputation as a leading African democracy. We congratulate again the

Electoral Commission for a well-run election, the seventh consecutive peaceful such and an example for many others.

But we call once again on all political parties to disown and disband all so-called vigilante groups which should simply have no place in a 21st Century democracy. And where such groups act violently or usurp the role of the State, they should face the full force of the law. Violence can so quickly spiral and can kill as we have, so sadly, seen this week. In that context, please allow me to extend our deepest condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Captain Maxwell Mahama, RIP.

I recall, too, how our development programme – amounting to several hundred million pounds in just the last three years – has contributed so much to so many necessary tasks, whether by providing millions of bed nets; or through start-up funding to some of Ghana's brightest young entrepreneurs with Ghana's best new business ideas; whether by supporting women and girls through improved educational and reproductive health opportunities while addressing the scourges of domestic violence, the mistreatment of so-called 'witches', female genital mutilation and child marriage; or whether by helping to underpin successive governments' commitment to the LEAP programme, to improved agricultural production and market access, and to tackle the too often hidden and stigmatised problem of mental illness. And in these last three years we have also helped 700 young UK volunteers under the International Citizen Service programme to come to Ghana to assist local communities.

In short, our DFID programmes have directly helped hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians and will continue to do so, and I salute the huge contribution to all that of Jim McAlpine, the Head of DFID Ghana, who also concludes his posting and leaves Ghana later this month. Thank you Jim!

Ladies and Gentlemen

I also recall how our British Council colleagues have hugely increased UK support to young entrepreneurs to develop their digital and social enterprise skills, while building the Connecting Classrooms programme bringing together UK and Ghanaian schoolchildren, and supporting UK universities to expand our higher education links, of which our Chevening Scholarship programme – now with nearly 300 Ghanaian alumni – is a jewel in the crown.

Plus, there are so many other areas I could mention, such as our large training and other support in the military sphere to the Ghana Armed Forces and Kofi Annan Centre, including in peacekeeping cooperation and counter-terrorism work; or our hugely expanding law enforcement cooperation to tackle drugs trafficking, people trafficking and other forms of organised crime; or our work to improve prison conditions at Nsawam and elsewhere.

In short, we are very proud of our work in all those areas, all aimed at assisting Ghana on its path to fuller economic development and out of poverty. The President has spoken of his aspiration to move to a "Ghana Beyond Aid" – and it is our honour and duty to help Ghana where we can to achieve just that. People often forget what the long-term aim of an aid

programme ought to be, namely to assist its recipient to reach a point where it is no longer necessary. We remain highly confident that Ghana can reach that point in the years to come.

Ghana is a fantastic country, a country I feel such affection for and such hopes for. Or to put it simply – I love Ghana, medoh Ghana paaa! This is a country full of potential, talent, human dignity and inner strength. I have travelled widely and consistently been touched by the warmth, hospitality, generosity of spirit and good humour of so many Ghanaians, including many whose daily lives are ones of real struggle just to get by. Ghana's people, its human capital, is a real treasure. That is why we are fundamentally optimistic about Ghana's future.

But it is not all rosy of course. Those who pretend everything is just fine when they know it isn't, or who refuse to recognise problems which are as plain as day, do a disservice to themselves, to those they work for and with, and ultimately to their country.

In the last three years, for example, our total UK-Ghana bilateral trade has fallen much too far – in fact, by nearly a third from its 2012 peak. We must look to recapture and then exceed those levels soon, underpinned we hope by significantly improving macroeconomic management, and a better business and investment climate here – both areas in which we are also making a contribution in line with the government's priorities. The signs are good and British companies are again looking to Ghana, while our new UK Ghana Chamber of Commerce is motoring ahead.

At the High Commission, we have also seen far too much attempted visa fraud, including by people occupying high positions commanding societal respect who seem to think that the rules apply to everybody else but themselves, or that they can break those rules with impunity. I think we have made it clear enough: we will not tolerate visa fraud against us and we will ban those who attempt it.

It may, however, interest you to know that, during the last three years, we have approved more visa applications by Ghanaian citizens than we have refused – yes, an approval rate averaging over 50%, contrary to some claims we see. Or, to put it another way, we have approved visas for nearly 50,000 Ghanaian citizens in the last three years. But it is, and will remain, our absolute sovereign right to control entry into our country by visitors, workers and would-be immigrants.

And, of course, we have seen far too much greedy, wanton corruption in too many spheres – in government, in politics, in public administration, in religion, in traditional leadership, in business, in football, in the media – and at too many different levels from top to bottom.

I refer, for example, to highly padded single-source contracts and unfairly awarded tenders; I refer to obvious conflicts of interest by those who use state positions to promote private business interests; and I refer to numerous egregious cases on which no action is taken, such as the arson fire at the Central Medical Stores in early 2015 in which over £4 million worth of

UK-funded medical supplies were destroyed and for which nobody – yet at least – has faced justice.

Indeed, nobody – not a single person – of any high standing has been sent to jail for corruption in Ghana for more than a decade. I know many Ghanaians who say, at least privately to us, that it is high time that changed. They are right and we support them.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Yes, we have made and we will continue to make an issue of corruption. We make no apology for that. Corruption is a long and sophisticated word for which a much shorter and clearer word suffices, namely – theft. Corruption so enriches the few and so impoverishes the many, and is therefore such a huge obstacle to Ghana fulfilling its true potential.

Those who steal state resources or abuse their positions of trust to enrich themselves, their families and their friends are effectively robbing millions of their own Ghanaian compatriots of their best possible future. When someone buys a luxury property here in Accra or overseas, it is perfectly legitimate to ask whether the money invested in this way was legitimately obtained. But it seems to me, after three years here, that everybody knows that these questionable practices are happening but few dare to talk about it openly. So, we end up in a scenario, like in that fairy tale about the emperor's clothing, where it is simply taboo to talk openly about what is staring us right in the face, and a kind of hypocrisy risks becoming hardwired into the national discourse.

There is, I submit however, a direct line to be drawn between, on the one hand, a few people right here in Accra who own fleets of V8s – each one of those vehicles costing multiples of their official annual salary – and, on the other hand, the still far too many examples throughout Ghana where children are forced to go to school under a tree rather than in a classroom – a classroom, incidentally, that could cost much less than the value of just one of those V8s to build. That seems to me a particularly apt comparison today, the first of June, which is UN International Children's Day.

The moral of this story? It seems that for a few people easy money is a better choice than hard work, and that self-interest hugely trumps the national interest.

So, we salute you, Mr President, in your determination to address this scourge of corruption which has simply got worse in recent years and sometimes veered out of control; and your determination to punish – finally – its worst perpetrators with real sanctions. We hope that all political parties and Ghanaians from all walks of life will take this chance to act. Few things are more important for Ghana's future. The UK stands ready and willing to help your efforts to combat corruption for the undoubted benefit of the whole of Ghana.

Ladies and Gentleman, I note in conclusion that these last three years have been more than averagely eventful, and not just here in Ghana.

In the UK, during that time, we had a general election with an unexpected result, a referendum about Scotland's continuing place in the United Kingdom, and another resulting in the UK deciding to leave the European Union. And a week from today, somewhat unexpectedly, we have another general election, now in the wake of the cowardly and heinous attack in Manchester early last week. These are turbulent times. But through all of that we have enjoyed one constant, as we have indeed for the last 65 years, namely Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, our wonderful Queen, whose 91st birthday we mark here tonight.

And through all of the political ups and downs, bound by a long common history, first of colonialism but now of a 60-year track record of partnership between equal, independent Commonwealth nations, UK-Ghana relations have endured, grown and flourished, producing real results for real people in both countries. Long may that continue.

And, so, with sincere thanks to each and every one of you, with fondness and sadness in equal measure, I take my leave of you. Ghana will remain in our heart and thoughts throughout my family's next chapter of a three-year home posting in London and far beyond. We and all of us in the UK want nothing more than the very best possible future for Ghana as a nation and for all its wonderful people. And you can count on us to accompany you on that journey as a steadfast friend.

Thank you, Medaase