

# viewpoint

## Jonathan, Abati and the Ribadu report



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**R**EUBEN Abati and Doyin Okupe are amongst the best in their business. And by this, I mean the business of dissembling. That was exactly what Abati did in his latest treatise, "Jonathan and the Ribadu Report". I don't begrudge both men. Their job is to be evasive and to try as much as possible to mislead while continuously throwing lies at us in the hope that some will stick; our responsibility is to cut through their BS. Indeed, it was a lot of BS that Abati attempted to heap on us in his last outing.

Abati began his latest assault on our collective sensibilities with an overdose of insult when he wrote, "It is so unfortunate that there has been so much ignorant carping and malicious tittle-tattling about the report of the Petroleum Revenue Task Force chaired by Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, both failings arising from a deliberate attempt to individualise what was actually a group work, a mischievous attempt to politicise one report out of three, and to smuggle into an emergent grand web of conspiracy, elements of blackmail, mischief and outright opportunism".

As the master of BS himself, Abati knows too well that the "putrefacious stench of the fart that seems to have overtaken the subject" comes from no other place than the Presidency. Here is a chronology of the Presidency and Abati's metamorphosis on the Petroleum Revenue Special Task Force report.

A few days after the report was made public by *Reuters*, Abati claimed it was meant to embarrass the government. According to him, "excerpts from the report could not be taken as an official document because the committee had not formally submitted its report to the appropriate authority. As far as the Federal Government was concerned, the report in the public domain was suspicious". This was the

first clear attempt to undermine the PRSTF report.

Abati then went on to qualify the task of the committee and foreclose the prospect of anyone

being held to account: "For the avoidance of doubt and for the benefit of the naysayers, the committees were set up as fact-finding and advisory bodies to generate ideas and recommendations about how best to strengthen the oil and gas sector and to further pursue the objectives of institutional integrity, transparency and accountability". Abati didn't see anything wrong in Steve Orosanye and Bernard Otti being appointed into different positions in the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation while serving on the PRSTF. "It is important to note that this committee and other committees had government officials and ex-staff as members," he intoned.

We all know the role Oronsaye and Otti played in their attempt to scuttle the report during its submission to the President on November 2. Their infamous intervention was done at great insult and inconvenience to the President. But who cares or rather, who gives a damn? Of course, insult and inconvenience count for nothing when billions of dollars and the President's anointed are involved.

A week after the PRSTF submitted its report, as it became evident that the controversy instigated by the Presidency will simply not go away, Abati's 'second-in-command' and Senior Special Assistant to the President on Public Affairs, the voluble Doyin Okupe, alerted us to paragraph four of the covering letter of the PRSTF report signed by Ribadu and the secretary, Olasupo Shasore, SAN.

The offending paragraph which Okupe alluded to, states: "The data used in this report was presented by various stakeholders who made submissions to the Task Force at various dates, which have been disclosed in relevant sections of the report. Due to the time frame of the assignment, SOME (emphasis mine) of the data used could not be independently

verified and the Task Force recommends that the government should conduct such necessary verification and reconciliation."

The implication of this "overriding" paragraph in Okupe's omniscient reasoning was that "the committee had issued a disclaimer to its own report which will now make it impossible under our laws to indict or punish anybody except and until the Federal Government fully verifies and reconciles the facts as recommended by the committee in its submission to the government." Can anything be more contradictory? Can Okupe be more ridiculous and unconvincing? The committee admitted that the reason it could not verify SOME of the data used was the "time frame" of the assignment. How does this constitute a "disclaimer" or absolve those responsible for the rot in the oil sector as indicated in the report?

In his desperate effort to stand reality on its head, Okupe shoots himself in the foot when he says the "disclaimer" will "make it impossible to indict or punish anybody except and until the Federal Government fully verifies and reconciles the facts as recommended by the committee in its submission to the government". In one instance, he calls the committee's statement a "disclaimer"; in another, he praises the report by implying that the government will do what the committee recommends it does: "conduct such necessary verification and reconciliation". How addlebrained can one be in the defence of falsehood? Okupe's assurance that a White Paper will be issued and the recommendations would be fully implemented after the Presidency completes the uncompleted work of the PRSTF is as reassuring as asking Okupe to head the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission.

Back to Abati and his disdain for truth and commonsensical argument. He accused Zakari Mohammed, Chairman, House Committee on Media and Public Affairs, of "talking absent-mindedly about 'lack of political will' to fight corruption" in his (Mohammed's) criticism of the

President's handling of the PRSTF report. There is nothing new about Mohammed's postulation. Every right-thinking Nigerian holds that view.

This government has no redeeming feature. It was clear from the outset that the Presidency was looking for ways to undermine the PRSTF report so as to let itself and its cronies off. The Presidency was not interested in the committee's report. If it was, it would not have created so much ruckus around the report. It simply would have given the committee extra time to finish its work if it felt the report was incomplete.

With the PRSTF report, President Goodluck Jonathan has met his Waterloo. Thankfully, the report has received the support of the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. NEITI says the PRSTF report reechoes the findings detailed in its own report on the monumental corruption and waste in the oil and gas sector that have yet to be implemented.

Aso Rock under President Jonathan has become a graveyard of committee reports. We have lost count of the number of committees Jonathan has set up since May 6, 2010, when he first became President. There is a common thread to all the committee reports: their non-implementation.

To say the government lacks the "political will" to fight corruption is to be charitable to the President. This government has made corruption the directive principle of state policy. This was evident the very moment President Jonathan failed the political-will-to-fight-corruption litmus test when he refused to publicly declare his asset at the inception of his government on May 29, 2011, and went ahead during a nationwide media chat on national TV in June to heap scorn on Nigerians by saying he did not "give a damn" about declaration of asset.

At that very moment, President 'IDGAD' Jonathan declared war, not on corruption, but against Nigerians.