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SAVE THE NATION: EMBRACE HONEST DIALOGUE- STATEMENT BY THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, CBCN.

After carefully reviewing the state of the nation, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) has deemed it necessary to issue this statement as a contribution in search for a way forward.

Although the immediate cause of the impasse is closely related to the issue of the removal of fuel subsidy, it does seem to us that things seem to be deteriorating by the day. We feel that through sincere dialogue, all sides might very quickly come to an agreement and resolve to move our nation forward. But as the days have rolled by, both sides have remained rather truculent and continue to dig their heels in. So far, on the surface, all parties claim that they have the welfare of the poor in mind, but as we can see, it is actually the poor who are caught in the crossfire.

Since this issue was mooted, we have not stood by on the side. On December 7th we issued a Press statement in which we raised the point that „ Such an important issue as this be decided **only** by a reasonable consensus after thorough consultation".

As things are, every responsible Nigerian is very concerned about the current situation. It is clear that the strike in many places has been hijacked by rogues, hoodlums and persons that have other interests apart from the nation's in minds. What started out as an expression of our democratic right and the opportunity for ordinary people to make inputs into policy affecting them has unfortunately turned rather ugly and is looking like the dialogue of the deaf. We condemn the introduction of violence, unruly behavior in this otherwise noble exchange of ideas and views. But we must move on. As such, we wish to make the following recommendations for both sides so that our country can move forward.

First, we believe that debates over policy by all stakeholders enrich democracy. But this must be conducted in a way or manner that enriches the process and engenders respect for the democratic tradition. Therefore, in the spirit of our much cherished democracy, we call on all sides to return to the dialogue table NOW.

Secondly, whatever may be the issues, the stability of our nation should be uppermost in our minds. Against the backdrop of the daunting challenges posed by Boko Haram and other disgruntled agents of destabilization, we need to rally round and ensure that we quickly become our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We must not offer those who do not wish our nation well an opportunity to exploit these conditions.

Thirdly, all sides have made their case and our country and its democracy is the richer for it. By engaging in these exchanges, Nigerians have had a chance to make their case. We are convinced that the President means well in his initiative. We also believe that in principle, the removal of subsidy is the way to go. However, "he that fights and runs lives to fight again". A shift in position is not cowardice. Some concession- removal of part of the subsidy now, is advised. We are all agreed that corruption has denied us the chance of building virile and united nation and the fuel subsidy removal is a strike at the roots of corruption. It is also necessary that the federal, state and local governments, the national and state assemblies should check the unwieldy cost of governance which spreads corruption.

The courageous move of Mr. President to cut salaries of elected officers and political appointees by 25% is an action in the right direction. But we think it is not enough. We think this is the time Mr. President can cut corruption from the roots by ordering massive cuts in the FRING BENEFITS that are even above the salaries- sitting, travel, hospitality and all forms of allowances that make politicians and government officials financial overlords on the poor citizens.

The Organized Labour on the other hand must not allow sentiments to block its focus or allow mob rising to shade intelligence. Democracy is

based on the principle of the supremacy of the common good. It is the common good of Nigerians that matters. Prolonged strike that impedes commerce and ruins economy is surely not in the interest of the nation. Above all, enduring values of human life is worth fighting for than material goods.

The shaky security situation of our country should be the concern of Organized Labour and Government. The menace of Boko Haram which has systematically decimated our population; armed robbery, kidnapping, ethnic conflicts are- issues which leaders and the led in Nigeria should sincerely work on through dialogue, mutual respect, justice, peace and reconciliation in order to salvage the land from those who would destroy it and its people.

The Nigerian people on whose behalf we are all genuinely concerned appreciate the intentions of both sides, Government and Organized Labour. But we believe the case has been made and it is time now for COMPROMISE for the nation to move forward. We must do so today for a stitch in time saves nine.

+F. Ade Job 
Archbishop of Ibadan

President, Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria