Today, the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation – comprising dozens of waterfront communities and other informal settlements across Lagos – reacts to the clarification of the eviction threat by the Lagos State Government on 18 October 2016 and we renew our call for dialogue between threatened communities and Government.

For the last 10 days, dozens of our member communities on waterfronts across Lagos State have been thrown into pandemonium over the public statement of His Excellency, Governor Akinwunmi Ambode on 9 October 2016 which was reported in the media as follows: “we will commence demolition of all the shanties around the creeks in Lagos State and also around our waterways in the next seven days.” Based on our profiling of over 40 communities, such action threatens at least 300,000 persons with homelessness.

On 11 October 2016, seventeen of our member communities held an emergency meeting and resolved to write an open letter to the Governor demanding retraction of this notice. When we had no reply, we embarked on a peaceful protest to Alausa on 13 October 2016 to request audience with the Governor. We were met by the Office of Civic Engagement, which appealed to us to give them 36 hours in which to seek the Governor’s response. Within those 36 hours, the Government commenced demolition of Ilubirin community. We received no response from the Government. Consequently, as the 7-days' notice was about to expire, we had no choice but to embark on a second day of peaceful protests at Alausa.

At all opportunities, our request has been dialogue with the Lagos State Government. However, meaningful dialogue can only take place when neither party is under duress – here, the threat of immediate eviction and demolition of our homes and communities.

Although the Lagos State Government has not engaged us directly, we do appreciate that on 18 October 2016, several Lagos State Commissioners saw fit to respond via press briefing aimed at clarifying the nature of the eviction threat. We use the same medium to react.

We reject the Government’s implication that, by writing to the Governor and engaging in peaceful protests, we are using “cheap blackmail.” We are peacefully exercising our civil rights to draw the attention of the Government and the public to our plight.
We also reject the accusation that we are inciting the public against the Government. Rather, it is the Government’s resort to overbroad threats to the lives, shelter, and livelihoods of ordinary Nigerians and the urban poor that has led to public demonstrations.

We also reject the Government’s characterization of our waterfront communities as the “abode of miscreants/street urchins, kidnappers, touts....” Our communities are home to law-abiding, hard-working urban poor, most of whom are fishermen and women engaged in fish smoking and fish selling. Anyone who visits our communities would find registered sand-dealing businesses, fish smoking facilities, barbershops, provisions stores, churches, mosques, and so many other facilities where lawful business and normal daily life occurs. We contribute meaningfully to the economy of Lagos; indeed the urban poor are the engine of the economy. We pay taxes, levies, rates and charges to the local and state governments.

We reject all such foul language that aims to defame and demonize the urban poor. We urge the Government and others to take time to engage with us and visit our communities to meet the hard-working, law-abiding residents and to henceforth cease such defamation.

We appreciate the Government’s statement that it “would be considerate to the plight of those considered as urban poor.” We are concerned, however, that the Government seems to persist in suggesting that we, the urban poor, jeopardize the safety of others in the city. According to UN Habitat, an estimated 67% of people living in Nigerian cities – including Lagos – live in settlements classified as slums. We are not the few, we are the majority.

We agree with the Government’s concern over structures built under high-tension wires. We are also concerned with the safety of our communities and we are educating our community members to ensure respect for required setbacks for high-tension wires.

We remain concerned about the Government’s open threat to structures along riverbanks. We remind that people and particular ways of life existed in Nigeria long before there were building regulations. A number of peoples indigenous to southern Nigeria have coexisted with water since time immemorial and built our homes close to or above water. Our indigenous construction methods are not unsafe; nor are they a threat to free flow of water. Rather, they are adaptive to the flood-prone conditions of low-lying areas like Lagos. Our building regulations and laws should recognize and leave room for our local traditions.

We appreciate that the Government’s clarification left out any mention of settlements along the shore of lagoons, creeks, and the ocean, focusing instead exclusively on riverbanks. However, this is not sufficient assurance for communities close to other water bodies to rest easy and sleep with both eyes closed. We remain vigilant with our sister communities.

In light of all the above, we hereby renew our call for dialogue between ourselves, communities that fear they fall under the Government’s open threat, and the Government. We remind Government that we are in a democratic dispensation. As citizens, we are expected to proactively engage our Government through lawful exercise of our civil rights.
We call for reframing the megacity dream as an aspiration for an INCLUSIVE MEGACITY in which the urban poor also have a place and opportunity to pull ourselves out of poverty. We call for realistic policies and laws that do not criminalize our homes and our livelihoods, but rather create accessible pathways for gradual formalization.

The Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation is a movement of the urban poor for our dignity and development, made up of community savings groups in over 70 slums and informal settlements here in Lagos – and growing also in other Nigerian cities. In addition to community-led economic empowerment through our savings groups, we work with our member communities to undertake citywide slum profiling, mapping, and enumeration to identify and understand our development challenges and opportunities to feed into our collective advocacy for a better urban future. We are supported by Justice & Empowerment Initiatives – Nigeria and affiliated with Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a global network of slumdwellers’ federations in 36 countries around the world.

We are working with our member communities and other partners to gradually upgrade our communities through innovative, environmentally sustainable sanitation solutions and more holistic in situ upgrading. We have a social housing committee that is developing prototypes for construction of social housing with private-public-community partnership. We have a network of community paralegals who report cases to local police stations, etc.

All these strategies we are employing are aimed at helping ourselves, the urban poor, gradually move out of poverty, improve security, and upgrade our settlements. Mass demolition will only set us back in our efforts by causing widespread homelessness, loss of livelihoods, separation of families, etc. We need partnership and dialogue with Government, not demolition, to build a safer, more resilient and inclusive megacity.

PLEASE JOIN US IN DEMANDING THE FULL RETRACTION OF THE EVICTION NOTICE TO WATERFRONTS ACROSS LAGOS AND CALLING FOR PARTNERSHIP TO FIND LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS TO SECURITY AND SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT. Thank you.

SIGNED:

NIGERIAN SLUM/INFORMAL SETTLEMENT FEDERATION, LAGOS CHAPTER

For more information or to visit some of the affected communities, please contact:
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Photographs of recent peaceful protests available for use by journalists here:
Day 1 of #SaveTheWaterfronts protests, 13 October 2016:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/93512835@N04/albums/72157674093327730

Day 1 of #SaveTheWaterfronts protests, 17 October 2016:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/93512835@N04/albums/72157675266733906