



Keynote Address by H.E. John Dramani Mahama
President of the Republic of Ghana,

at the
Official Opening of the 2026 Judicial Year and 20th Anniversary
of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights

Monday, 02 March 2026 | Arusha, United Republic of
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- Excellencies, Colleague Heads of State and Government
- The Chairperson of the African Union Commission
- Justice Blaise Tchikaya, President of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights
- Honourable Judges of the African Court
- Your Lordships, Chief Justices and Heads of International and Regional Courts
- Distinguished Representatives of AU Organs and Member States
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- Representatives of Civil Society, the Legal Fraternity and the Media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon.

I am truly honoured to join you this morning for the official opening of the 2026 Judicial Year of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights.

I must also acknowledge that this experience is somewhat daunting. Standing before a panel of judges is, admittedly, quite intimidating.

For many people, this might be a worst nightmare.

Perhaps I am drawing from my own experiences. As a teenager, I often dreamt of my father standing before judges, awaiting their decision on his fate.

He was detained once and faced that risk twice more. These fears led to recurring nightmares about him.

Honourable Judges, I extend my deepest gratitude to you for inviting me to address the Court today, as your Guest of Honour, at the opening of the judicial year and the launch of the Court's 20th anniversary.

I am grateful because this institution and its commemoration hold deep personal significance.

My connection to these themes is rooted in my family history, which has shaped my perspective on justice.

I have spent much of my life reflecting on justice, due process, and the rule of law. Why are these rights afforded to some and not to others?

The same applies to human rights and dignity, which have been on my mind in recent days.

February 24th, which was early last week, marked another anniversary. It was 60 years since the 1966 coup d'état that overthrew the government of Ghana's first president, Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah.

My father was a Minister of State in Nkrumah's government.

Immediately after the coup, he, along with other ministers of state, members of parliament and other government officials, was asked to report to the police station "for his own safety."

There, he was interrogated, taken into custody, and he remained in detention for over a year.

By 1974, just eight years later, Ghana was being led by our fifth Head of State and third military ruler, Colonel I.K. Acheampong.

At that time, my father was a private citizen, working as a rice farmer and agribusinessman, with no involvement in government.

He was a staunch believer in democracy and opposed the coup-makers, but he appreciated Colonel Acheampong, whose policies promoted Ghana's self-sufficiency.

He believed that Acheampong had Ghana's best interests at heart.

Like many parents, my father—and I as well—often offered unsolicited advice. It starts with one's children and eventually extends to friends, neighbours, strangers, and even the Head of State.

My father decided to write a letter to Colonel Acheampong, the head of state, to let him know that he was doing a wonderful job of leading Ghana.

In that letter, he offered unsolicited advice: “But do not hold on to power for too long. Leave when the applause is loudest,” my father wrote.

He sent the letter, and soon after, military personnel arrived at our home and took my father to the barracks for questioning.

He was detained for several days on suspicion of subversion, but Colonel Acheampong ultimately determined he posed no threat and ordered his release.

Although I stand before you as a Head of State, I remain the child whose father was detained for serving his country and advising its leader.

I am still the boy who learned how dangerous it can be to challenge those in power, who may act with impunity and assume the roles of judge, jury, and executioner.

Therein lies my belief and respect for the rights and dignity of people.

Excellencies, Honourable Judges, Ladies and Gentlemen, I share my father's story to illustrate that, while he was one individual, his experience demonstrates that no one stands alone.

The effects of social injustice and human rights violations extend beyond individuals; they impact entire families and communities.

Although our continent comprises 55 sovereign nations, our destinies are closely linked. Globally, many still view Africa as a single entity and refer to us collectively as 'Africa.' Is it any wonder?

Look at the synergy that existed between us during Africa's era of liberation. One nation after another, in quick succession, declared freedom from colonial rule.

Then again, when coup d'états became a common occurrence, that tendency spread, like a contagion, through nearly every nation.

We are each other's keepers.

This is why we need an institution that serves all but is beholden to none: the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights.

Let us now consider the institution that safeguards our values and rights.

Over the past two decades of its operation, the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights has proven time and again that it has the fortitude and courage to recalibrate our moral compass.

We need that kind of oversight so that we remain observant and respectful of the rights and duties enumerated in the articles of the Banjul Charter, to which all the continent's nations are signatory.

That Charter complements the Court's mission.

Now, we must empower the Court to be the institution that stands guard over those ideals, protecting and preserving our greatest inheritance.

I am proud that Ghana has contributed its share of legal minds to this august court over the years.

Justice Sophia Akuffo served from 2006 to 2014 and rose to the position of President of the court.

She later served as Chief Justice of Ghana from 2017 until her retirement in 2019.

Justice Dennis Adjei, a respected member of Ghana's Supreme Court, is serving a six-year term following his 2022 election.

Africa has been blessed with many of the world's natural resources, including gold, silver, diamonds, copper, cobalt, uranium, oil, lithium, and more.

At times, it becomes easy to overlook that our most significant inheritance is our people and their cultural legacies.

Those who have benefited from our continent for centuries have always understood this powerful truth.

That is why Patrice Lumumba, Eduardo Mondlane, Thomas Sankara, and Amilcar Cabral were assassinated.

That is why the Asantehene Nana Prempeh I, over 150 members of his clan, and later Nana Yaa Asantewaa were all banished from Ghana to the Seychelles.

Similarly, Omukama Kabalega of Bunyoro in Uganda was also banished to Seychelles.

That is why Sam Nujoma was forced into exile from Namibia, and Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island, a former leper colony off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa.

That is why Steve Biko was murdered in prison.

We felt the absence of these individuals and recognised the potential that was lost.

What I refer to in my book as 'The Lost Decades of Africa' was the period from the mid-to-late 1970s until the early 1990s, when brain drain occurred, and the continent stagnated.

The median per capita growth of developing African countries was 0.0 per cent.

We felt the loss of those who left to seek better opportunities for themselves and their children.

These were ordinary people from all walks of life: architects, doctors, engineers, artists, businesspeople, bankers, and workers in transportation and hospitality.

Excellencies, Honourable Judges, imagine if Africa measured its wealth not by natural resources, but by its people—valued individuals, free from oppression, conflict, persecution, and violence, and assured of their rights to life, dignity, liberty, and self-determination.

What would that look like?

How much differently would we see ourselves? What would that wealth mean for the strength and continued sovereignty of our nations?

These are not just questions for a game of 'what if.' They are based on the reality of our near future.

These are questions we must ask ourselves, as leaders and citizens, to determine the nations we are building and the world we wish to create.

By 2050, Africa's population will reach 2.5 billion. More than a quarter of the world's population will be African.

By the end of this century, nearly 40% of the world's population will be African.

Already, the median age on the African continent is 19, compared with nearly 45 in the European Union and 39 in the United States.

Can we imagine the power that we hold in our hands?

Technological advances have made the world feel like a small place. At no other time in our lifetimes was that more evident than during the COVID pandemic.

By the time the World Health Organisation announced the discovery of a novel virus in Wuhan, China, that virus was already on an aeroplane to Johannesburg.

It was present in Accra, on the roadside as individuals waited for a tro-tro at Kwame Nkrumah Circle or seated toward the rear of a 'dala dala' enroute to Ngaramtoni.

If you look beyond Africa, what you'll find is that the façade of the so-called Global North, a group of countries that have long held themselves up as beacons of democracy and human rights, of liberty, justice, and the rule of law, is fast crumbling.

Judiciaries are no longer independent; citizens and lawful residents are being disappeared by masked law enforcement and then placed, without due process, indefinitely in detention centres.

We see executive overreach and a steady weakening of legislative independence.

Restrictions are being placed on freedom of speech, assembly, and protest. There is a general loss of liberties and a sharp decline in public trust in governments.

Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere famously said, "One does not judge one's state of health by comparing it to a sick person."

For far too long, we have compared ourselves to the West and used what we believed were their standards as benchmarks for our endeavours.

The reality we see today should serve as a clear call to action. What should be our paradigm in understanding and interacting with the world, even as we preserve our dignity and cultural identity as Africans?

Honourable Judges, Ladies and Gentlemen, I call upon African Union member states who have not yet ratified the Protocol to please do so without delay.

To my colleagues in those countries, I assure you that you have nothing to fear from this Court.

I humbly ask all African nations and individuals to respect and implement the Court's judgements in good faith. And to also make the declaration to allow individuals and NGOs direct access to the Court.

My father's political tribulations did not end with his detention after he wrote the letter advising the Head of State.

He had to live in exile for 13 years after another coup d'état. But many others suffered even greater injustice and abuse of their rights and dignity.

Many individuals have endured significant hardship throughout their lives.

The Lumumbas, Mondlane, Sankaras, Cabrals, Prempehs, Yaa Asantewas, Kabalegas, Nujomas, Mandelas, and Bikos are all recognised as martyrs of the African revolution.

Had the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights existed earlier in our past, these grave instances of human rights abuse and injustice would have been very important cases to adjudicate.

We would have secured justice against racist apartheid criminals, colonialists and even our own oppressive African dictators who tortured and killed many.

As I said earlier, all the nations on the African continent are each other's keepers. I truly believe this.

I also believe that each of us is a keeper of the dreams and hopes our ancestors could not achieve.

We can pave the way for their dreams to be realised, if not by us, then by the generations succeeding us.

Justice systems in Africa have strengthened over the past decades. In Ghana, we are strengthening our judicial systems.

As I stand and recollect my youth, and my fear for my father through my recurring nightmares, I realise that I can put those fears to rest.

For the past 20 years, we have had a court that can protect the rights and dignity of African people beyond the borders of our individual nations.

So, allow me to say, while I am here in this historic city of Arusha, a city well known as the site where human rights are affirmed and the dignity of African people is protected, that the time is now.

Now is the time for us to meet the challenge of keeping the promises we have made to future generations—promises we have signed and pledged to uphold.

Now is the time to deepen our commitment to the Court, so that in 20 years, when we celebrate its 40th anniversary, it will stand as the leading international judicial body and a model for others.

Now is the time for Africa to step into its greatness.

Excellencies, Honourable Judges, Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of all the good citizens of Africa, I am honoured to declare the 2026 Judicial Year of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights officially open.

I thank you for your kind attention.