

**ADDRESS BY THOMAS AKABZAA, NATIONAL CHAIRMAN OF BONABOTO AT  
THE FIFTH BONABOTO NATIONAL CONGRESS HELD AT THE CATHOLIC  
SOCIAL CENTRE, BOLGATANGA, DECEMBER 28-30, 2006**

It is a great pleasure to have this wonderful opportunity to meet again. On behalf of the National Executive Committee, I welcome you heartily to congress. In doing so we are mindful of the tremendous sacrifices you have made – competing commitments to your families, your personal projects and of course your time and money. Let me confess to you that one of the most important motivations to my executive and I have been your readiness to respond to any demands on you that is in furtherance of the BONABOTO agenda. Ya zaare, ya farafara!! Consequently, it is my hope that once we have chosen to sacrifice this precious time for this occasion we would endeavor to ensure that it is time well spent. The last time we held a congress was two years ago. The old challenges remain while new ones, against our wishes have arisen, and so if you find this speech long, please bear with me.

**Focus of the Fifth Congress**

After several years of congresses, there is the need to step back and take stock of what we have achieved, opportunities taken and those missed. Those opportunities missed and those moments we did not see as opportunities represent challenges. It is envisaged that this stock taking exercise will enable us chart a more visible and strategic path which will afford a more orderly identification of our priority developmental goals. It is our vision that this congress, at the very least, identifies the necessary issues for a) strengthening and developing the association for faster forward march; and b) for a more visible and effective role of the association in the BONABOTO area, the region and the north, as a whole.

While we explore these opportunities, there are major questions that need to be asked. We have a respected core of public and private sector professionals, but with dwindling opportunities for young ones to join them or replace them in the future. How do we ensure that there are opportunities for the young ones to step into our shoes? We similarly have a small group of businesspersons. How do we ensure a sustained and qualitative growth of this small but dynamic and dedicated cadre of businesspersons to ensure the expansion of their ranks and their businesses, and the grooming of the youth into their fold? What role can the association play to enable them take advantage of business and financing opportunities nationally and internationally? How can we provide the necessary platform that ensures that their activities have a strong, positive impact on poverty reduction in the area?

How do we as a collective fight the growing marginalization of our people? Many people are increasingly harbouring growing frustration and fear at the accelerated rate at which we are being crowded out of mainstream societal roles: from politics, government bureaucracy, to private businesses in the country. There is a latent feeling that the educated/professional BONABOTO group is increasingly becoming an endangered species. At the larger level, we as a people are fast losing our culture including our language and our identity. How do we fight these spectra of exclusion and gradual extinction?

Confronting these tasks would require a sobering reflection of our activities and ourselves; hence the appropriateness of this year's theme.

### **The Two Years in Retrospect**

Mr. Chairman, allow me to salute our predecessors, Mr. Vitus Azeem and his able executive, for the solid foundation they toiled to lay for the strong advancement of the association. I would also take this opportunity to express gratitude to our executives both at the national and branch levels, who have tried to sustain the momentum we inherited from our predecessors, though under trying circumstances. May we also at this time observe a minute's silence for departed members and pray that God grants them eternal rest.

During the period we successfully galvanized pressure on government to release the long delayed school feeding grants for second cycle institutions for the 2005/2006 academic year to enable our students remain in school and write their exams. We did not experience any delays in the 2006/2007 year and we want to think that the powers that be got our message loud and clear. We also organized the national launch of the BONABOTO Education Assistance Fund (BEAF).

Mr. Chairman, delegates, the BONABOTO area has historically been known as a place of peace. Unfortunately in late 2005 and early 2006, this enviable reputation was threatened by intra-communal clashes. Despite the daunting financial resource constraints, the association was able to engage in a number of conflict resolution activities aimed at securing the peace in the BONABOTO area. The association played a frontline role in the timely resolution of the Zonno-Tongo-Beo and Bukere-Soe intra-communal conflicts. I wish to commend our chiefs, elders, and all those who worked tirelessly to ensure this.

We have with our Dagaaba cousins continued to point the path to inter-ethnic peace in Ghana through the annual Dagaaba-Frafra games. These games have spread to the regions and continue to attract positive comments from other ethnic groups and officialdom. However, we wish to appeal to our Dagaaba cousins to train harder to prevent the games from becoming a one-sided affair in favor of the Grunsi. As our people say, 'lu tin lu nde baasi deongo'.

### **NATIONAL LAUNCH BONABOTO Education Assistance Fund (BEAF)**

The re-launch of the BONABOTO Education Assistance Fund and the level of commitment which resulted in its resounding success is worth mentioning. The exercise yielded nearly four hundred million cedis in cash and pledges. I would want to salute the BEAF committee members, once again for the tireless efforts put in that historic exercise. I would also like to commend the members who patronized the events, including the guests they brought along. The outcome demonstrated our commitment to take our destiny into our hands. Please join me in expressing our appreciation to Mr. P. V. Obeng chairman of the Ghana Investment Promotions Council, who was our special guest of honour and Alhaji Asuma Banda, Chairman of Antrak Group of companies who was chairman for the launching of the Fund.

Now that the seed money is in place it is expected that congress will engage in constructive debate on the proposals for the management of the fund. Congress owes contributors and our

sympathizers a duty to ensure that transparent and accountable management structures are put in place to ensure that the funds make the desired impact, and remain sustainable. There is the need to evolve more innovative projects, apart from disbursement to needy students to maximize the impacts of the fund. It is my desire for instance, that special place be given to the Gurene language project in the disbursement of the fund.

Accra, understandably, has made a rather disproportionate contribution to the fund. I implore all branches to evolve practical and innovative schemes to increase their contribution. Remember we are far from the one billion cedis target we set for ourselves.

## **Challenges**

### **Funding the National Secretariat**

There have been urgent and repeated calls for the establishment of a national secretariat, an issue that will be a subject of discussion of this congress. However, you cannot practically run a secretariat without funds. One major challenge facing the National Executive Committee is finance. Contributions from the branches are not only inadequate but also infrequently paid. We hope that we can get around this problem at this congress.

### **Fighting Political Exclusion**

The marginalization of our people in national affairs is growing and getting uglier. While we all have the challenge to reverse this, our politicians have an even bigger task. Our politicians, all of them, from whatever political divide, must understand that there is more they share in common than their parties provide. They share the same geographical space, the same degrading socio-economic conditions and the same anxieties and fears. We would therefore like to see our politicians put the interest of the area above partisan interests. There are many of us who are unhappy about the seeming lack of “weight” of our politicians in the national body politic. However, this lack of weight is not divorced from the way we portray ourselves. There is the perception that we have no following. Our politicians think they can acquire clout exclusively through patronage. Yet the absolute reliance on political patronage is indeed the source of their job insecurity and our growing lack of voice. Our politicians need to do a bit of reflection. Our politicians should remember that after the expiration of their political shelf life, they would come back to the same society from which they climbed to those lofty heights. A few weeks ago, a non-partisan group of young men and women came out to demonstrate against the marginalization of the Upper Regions. Against all reason, they were initially denied a permit. Without directly saying so, all they wanted to convey was that they did not feel that their people were being represented effectively in the corridors of power. Our politicians should listen now; else it would be too late at election time.

### **Strengthening BONABOTO**

There is no doubt that BONABOTO is growing from strength to strength within the country and in the Diaspora. The number of branches in the country continue to increase with some branches engaging in high profile activities that have continue to boost the association’s image. The

London branch of the association has expanded and has been very active in a variety of activities. The North America branch is young but has promise for growth. Our wish is that by the next congress every region and district will have a functional BONABOTO.

Despite these modest achievements, the association still faces a number of challenges. Our detractors continue to assign political motives to our activities while others think we are not doing enough practically on the ground. On the former, we will not waste our time while on the latter, we appeal for patience. If BONABOTO were politically partisan, it would have been dead long ago. There are also two major issues we need to resolve - the uneven representation of all the sections of the BONABOTO area in our meetings and the growing demand from our Nankani brethren to be part of the association. I urge Congress to devote time to these issues of representation in our deliberations.

### **Development in the Region**

Mr. Chairman, chiefs, delegates, I cannot conclude my presentation without drawing your attention to the question of urban sprawl; Bolgatanga, our capital town is fast becoming a shanty town due to unplanned and uncontrolled development. There is the need for a concerted effort on the part of the district assembly, the chiefs and all of us to help address this problem.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past two years, we have enjoyed the cooperation and encouragement from our fathers, that is, the chiefs of the BONABOTO area. We thank them sincerely for their cooperation and hope that together, and with their guidance, BONABOTO can and will fulfill its vision. In 2004, as in this year, the Archbishop and the Catholic Church have been major players in our congress and deliberations. They have been generous with their facilities and we hope that this fruitful collaboration will continue.

Thank you sincerely for your attention. For those who might have slept during my rather long speech, I hope they are now refreshed enough to participate in the weighty issues that we have before us. Tu lagm me.