



For immediate release – 28 February 2011

**PRESS RELEASE**

**Nigeria: Senate Must Strengthen and Adopt Right to Information Bill**

**Abuja 28.02.11: ARTICLE 19 welcomes the Nigerian House of Representatives recent unanimous approval of the draft Right to Information Bill, which provides all persons with a right to demand information from public institutions. The adoption of the bill now lies in the hands of the Senate, who have an opportunity to further strengthen the bill by including an independent public body to provide oversight. If the bill is adopted, Nigeria will become the second country in West Africa, along with Liberia, to have a Right to Information law.**

“A comprehensive right to information bill in Nigeria will contribute to strengthening political and economic governance, and increase transparency and accountability. The Senate has a golden opportunity to strengthen the bill before adopting it,” said Dr Agnes Callamard, Executive Director, ARTICLE 19.

“After more than a decade of advocacy and struggle, Nigeria civil society organisations can now derive a sense of comfort and achievement from this important milestone,” continued Callamard.

If adopted by the Senate, the bill will require government bodies to collect and maintain records, affirmatively publish 16 categories of information and respond to information requests within seven days. Government bodies are allowed to withhold some information including for national defence purposes, law enforcement, personal privacy and economic interests. Some of the exemptions have a public interest test and the Official Secrets Act is specifically overruled. There are also some rudimentary protections of whistleblowers provided in the bill. Individuals can appeal denials of requests to the Federal Court. Officials who stymie requests or destroy information can be jailed for up to three years.

ARTICLE 19 recommends that the bill be amended to create an independent oversight body to enforce the law, clarify exemptions relating to economic interests, law enforcement and personal privacy, and include a comprehensive public interest test for all exemptions. The bill should also require public bodies to create detailed implementation plans and increase protection of whistleblowers to ensure that they are not subject to job-related or other sanctions.

ENDS

## **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

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- For a copy of ARTICLE 19 previous statement from 2007, see <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/nigeria-foi-bill-statement.pdf>
- The bill was first introduced in 1999. In 2007, the bill was approved by the National Assembly but former President Obasanjo refused to assent to it before his term expired. The most recent bill is slightly revised from that version. Following its adoption, it has now been sent to the Senate for consideration. In February, Minister of Information and Communication, Labaran Maku committed the government support to the bill.
- Liberia is currently the only West African country with a Right to Information law.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.