

Pass Right to Information Bill

By Kofi Yeboah, ACCRA

GHANA'S Right to Information (RTI) Bill must conform to minimum international standard before passage, the African Union Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, Ms Pansy Tlakula, has advised.

She said there was the need to ensure, for instance, that both public and private institutions disclosed information that would enable the public to participate actively in the governance process.

In an interview with the *Daily Graphic* in Accra last Wednesday, Ms Tlakula urged Ghana to pass the RTI Bill as early as possible because the law would enhance transparency, accountability and good governance.

Mission

The visit of the AU Special Rapporteur formed part of her mandate to campaign for the passage of RTI laws in African countries based

Special Rapporteur

on the AU Model Law on Access to Information.

The model law, which was adopted in 2013, seeks to dispel the notion that RTI legislation is Western in character, and instead ensure that African countries adopt a home-grown standard and best practice.

About three years ago, there were only three African countries that had established an RTI legal regime, but the number has now increased to 13, including Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa.

"I think we are on the right path. It's slow but if you consider that three years ago only three countries had access to the Information law but now we have 13, I think that we are doing well," Ms Tlakula said.

She, however, noted that there was the need to do more in order to enhance transparency, accountability and good governance on the continent. When asked whether there are any pointers to suggest that the establishment of RTI laws has

enhanced transparency, accountability and good governance in the 13 African countries currently under that legal regime, the AU Special Rapporteur said it was early days yet and so the impact had been slow.

Meeting with stakeholders

While in Ghana, Ms Tlakula had met with the Speaker of Parliament, members of the Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, the Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection and some stakeholders in the RTI campaign.

She expressed the conviction that Ghana was strongly committed to passing the RTI Bill, which had been on the back burner of parliamentary consideration for more than a decade.

"There was absolute commitment that the bill will be

passed this term. As the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, I am encouraged by that commitment," she said.

Misconception

Ms Tlakula said there was a misconception that the RTI law was meant to promote the interest of the media, pointing out that it was a cross-cutting right for all to enjoy.

She, however, noted that the right to information was not absolute and that there were exemptions to the enjoyment of such right, especially in respect of national security matters.

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Quick read

The African Union Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, Ms Pansy Tlakula, has advised Ghana to ensure that its Right to Information (RTI) Bill conforms to minimum international standards before passage.

GHS unveils plans to tackle neglected tropical diseases

By Mary Mensah, ACCRA

THE Ghana Health Service (GHS) has launched the 2014 Mass Drug Administration and a five-year master plan for neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) in the country.

The launch of the two programmes coincided with the celebration of the Global One-Billionth Treatment of NTDs.

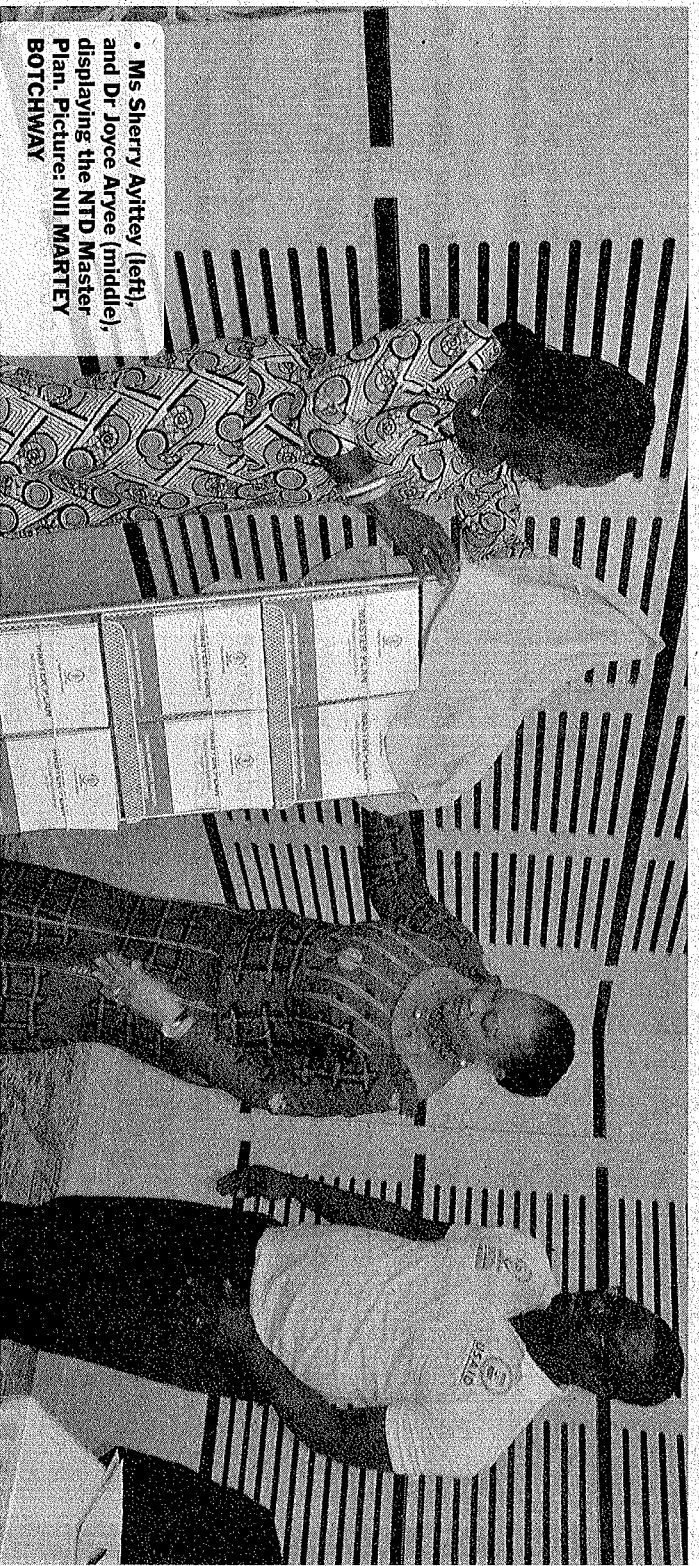
Under the master plan, the GHS and its supporting partners are to work towards the prevention, control, elimination or even eradication of NTDs by 2020.

Neglected tropical diseases

The NTDs are a group of 17 parasitic and bacterial infections that affect over 1.4 billion people worldwide, especially women, children and those living in remote areas with limited access to effective health care in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Launching the plan at a ceremony in Accra yesterday, the outgoing Minister of Health, Ms Sherry Ayitey, said Ghana was currently burdened with 10 NTDs, notable among them being lymphatic filariasis (popularly called elephantiasis), onchocerciasis, trachoma, bilharzia, burnuli ulcer and leprosy.

She said the government had put in place policies and programmes to



• Ms Sherry Ayitey (left), and Dr Joyce Aryee (middle), displaying the NTD Master Plan. Picture: NII/MARTEY BOTCHWAY

help address the illnesses and deaths associated with those diseases.

According to the outgoing minister, the diseases currently being targeted by the NTD programme in Ghana were trachoma, lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis and soil transmitted helminths with the strategies of mass drug administration, morbidity control and public education.

Ms Ayitey said other neglected diseases, such as Buruli ulcer, leprosy,

and yaws were being managed and implemented as disease specific programmes under the Public Health Division of the ministry.

She said lymphatic filariasis had an at-risk population of about 12 million people living in 98 districts in Ghana, while onchocerciasis had a population of about four million people living in 63 districts.

USAID support

The acting USAID/Ghana Mission Director, Mr Peter Trenchard, said

NTDs mostly affected the exclusively poor and powerless people living in rural and urban slums of low-income countries.

He said USAID was supporting 25 countries to introduce and scale-up integrated NTD control programmes and Ghana was one of the focus countries.

"Together we are investing in the health of Ghanaians and achieving great results and our fight against NTDs is part of the success," he said.

Dr Nana Kwadwo Biritwum, the Programme Manager of NTDs, said every district in Ghana had one or two of the neglected tropical diseases and urged all stakeholders to rally behind the plan to achieve positive results.

Dr Mrs Joyce Aryee, an Ambassador for NTDs in Ghana, indicated that those diseases were not given sufficient attention, noting that due to their tropical nature everybody was at risk.