

**SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF SIERRA LEONE, SHEKA TARAWALIE,
AT THE FIRST MEETING OF ECOWAS MINISTERS OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS ON STATELESS PERSONS AT
HOTEL SOFITEL, ABIDJAN, IVORY COAST, WEDNESDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2015**

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished ladies and gentleman

I bring you greetings from President Ernest Bai Koroma, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Government and people of Sierra Leone.

This august and momentous gathering – the first of its kind in our sub-region – is a testament to our collective will to remove the cancer of statelessness from the human family.

This fight is not a fight to help others, but a fight for ourselves - for our own integrity, our own dignity, and indeed our humanity.

We were all emotionally moved by the short video clip shown earlier during the opening ceremony about a man who does not know whether he is Ivorian or Burkinabe. We look at him and identify ourselves with him as a human being. His situation, representative of millions and millions across the world, and thousands and thousands in our sub-region, is a scar to civilization.

This meeting therefore cannot be more appropriate in charting the way forward in seeking measures to ensure that, in accordance with our collective desires, the issue of statelessness becomes a thing of the past.

Mr Chairman, this conference has come at a time when Sierra Leone has initiated a constitutional review process, which means it is an opportune time to deal with issues relating to statelessness. All sections of our society are being given an opportunity to make proposals to changes in the Constitution. Issues relating to statelessness and gender inequality are certainly going to be addressed.

Concurrently, Sierra Leone is in the process of formulating its national migration policy within the framework of the European Union Migration plan. We are also embarking on a civil registration programme that will certainly capture all persons within Sierra Leone, stateless or not.

Other policy measures are also being taken in addressing the issue of statelessness and by making the necessary revisions to the Sierra Leone Citizenship Act, the Births and Deaths Registration Act and the National Registration Act.

As a country, we have all along been guided by the 1969 OAU Convention governing specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa, while we have also been operating within the ECOWAS protocol of free movement of persons and the Mano River Union protocols on migration. On top of that, Sierra Leone has been making conscious efforts at observing the principles of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and the 1954 Convention relating to the status of stateless persons.

To this end, as at today, Sierra Leone is officially hosting 35 asylum seekers, 40 refugees, and has locally integrated 2,713 Liberian refugees.

Mr Chairman, I certainly can't end my statement without making mention of a deadly monstrous disease called Ebola, which has been ravaging this region for the past year or so. I want to use this opportunity to thank all those who have been fighting hard in helping us in finding a permanent solution to Ebola, so that what we have experienced cannot be experienced by other countries.

The fight against Ebola is related to the fight against statelessness. Ebola threatens the very functional existence of the state. Therefore,

while we are fighting statelessness, stateless people will have nowhere to live if the state disintegrates.

There was a time when we were not even allowed to attend conferences abroad, with the suspension of many flights to and from our country. Thank God the tide is turning; thank God we are in Ivory Coast today.

It is therefore heartening to re-join the human family on the level of equality, as our brothers and sisters in West Africa and beyond can now feel comfortable to shake our hands.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I stand here today to re-affirm Sierra Leone's determination to continue with the fight against statelessness through the ratification of the relevant conventions and their domestication.

Invariably, distinguished ladies and gentleman, I would like to underline and reiterate Sierra Leone's commitment to all that this gathering aspires to achieve. We remain committed – in collaboration with our partners, including in particular the UNHCR, UNOWA, IOM, the AU, ECOWAS, and MRU - to the fight to state the statehood of stateless persons.

We thank President Alhassan Ouatarra, the government and people of La Cote D'Ivoire for the great hospitality.

Merci beaucoup!