

Introduction Statement by the Vice President of the ECOWAS Commission H.E. Dr.  
Toga Gayewea Mcintosh  
To the Regional Ministerial Conference on Statelessness in West Africa

Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 25 February

Your Excellency, President Alassane Ouattara; President of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire;  
Mr. Chair, Minister Gnenema Mamadou Coulibaly, Minister of Justice, Human Rights and Public Liberties;  
Officials of the Ivorian Government Present;  
Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegations;  
Mr. António Guterres, UNHCR High Commissioner and his team;  
H.E. Dr Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for West Africa;  
Honourable Maya Sahli Fadel; AU Commissioner on Human and People's Rights;  
Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps;  
Her Excellency, the UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador;  
Dr. Fatimata Dia Sow, Commissioner, Social Affairs and Gender and her ECOWAS team  
Our hard working experts from Member States;  
Members of the Press;  
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen;

It is my pleasure, on behalf of the President of your Community, H.E. Kadre Desire Ouadraogo, to welcome you all to this very important conference. Our gathering gives concrete to our collective commitment to the human rights protection of our citizens and friends within the ECOWAS space.

Let me begin with your permission to place on record our deepest appreciation to H.E. President Alassane Ouattara, his Government and the good people of this friendly and progressive country for their usual great and warm hospitality.

Mr. President, your leadership role within our community is bearing desirable fruits; and we would like to thank you for that.

Your Excellencies, permit to also seize this opportunity to acknowledge the excellent collaboration between the ECOWAS Commission and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and to offer our assurance for a more stronger partnership in the years ahead.

In particular, we are gratified with the efforts of both sides in the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding between our two organizations, and the adoption of a Joint Plan of Action. Activities undertaken in search of durable solutions for refugees in our region, and the right of residence for asylum-seekers and refugees together with targeted capacity-building programs, are note-worthy.

Last year, we posted as part of our collaborative agenda, ECOWAS EERT Personnel in UNHCR within the context of the ECOWAS Humanitarian Mission to Mali. This enhanced the effectiveness of our intervention.

As we speak, our two organizations in partnership with others such as UNOCHA and IFRC, are fully engaged in developing a model for National Disaster Management Agencies (NDMA) in West Africa.

For these and others, I transmit the Commission's goodwill and appreciation to the High Commissioner. Over the years, UNHCR has consistently shown its faith in the ECOWAS/UNHCR partnership. We salute you and remain very hopeful for greater collaborations.

Honourable Ministers, you will recall, that your 2010 Ministerial Conference on Humanitarian Assistance and Internal Displacement focused on the ratification of the Kampala Convention on IDPs. West African States stepped up to the plate with nearly all countries ratifying, and we are happy to report that the Convention has come into force. Since that Conference, we have successfully conducted a 3-country study on the compliance with the Kampala Convention.

The results of which are being incorporated in the work programs of targeted countries.

Your Excellency, Mr. President;  
Honourable Ministers;  
Distinguished ladies and Gentlemen;

We are here today to build on what has been gained so far. The day's focus is on an exceptionally important matter. A matter that bears not only on the humanity and dignity of thousands of our peoples; but, a matter which bears also on the subject of Peace and Security.

While the right to a nationality has been recognized and respected as a basic human right, statelessness remains a sticky reality in West Africa. Sadly, this is so despite the ECOWAS Free Movement and the Right of Establishment Protocols.

In dispensing these protocols, the outstanding question relates to the definition of the "Community Citizens", and to matters of proof of one's status as a community citizen. Over the last few days, the experts must have considered this in their deliberations, and I am sure, the necessary progress will be made, particularly in resolving some of the outstanding issues which include the following:

- (1) the children of citizens of Member States with respect to place of birth, parental or maternal parentage;
- (2) Nationalization, dual nationality, and the loss and deprivation of nationality;
- (3) Weak or non-existent systems for the protection of stateless persons.

Let me now conclude your Excellencies on a critical note. The attainment of ECOWAS vision 2020, which place our peoples at the center of our integration process; and our collective goals for peace, security and development are all contingent upon the attainment of human and citizens' rights. Combatting the phenomenon of STATELESSNESS is inevitably an important integral component for realizing the above-stated objectives.

It is therefore our fervent hope, that the outcome of today's Conference, will greatly aid us in addressing the critical issue of statelessness in our region.

Thanks for your attention.