

READ BY THE VICE-PRESIDENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE GAMBIA
FATOUHATA JALLOU TAHBAJANG

The Opening Statement Of the President Of The Republic Of The Gambia,

H.E. Mr. Adama Barrow

Second ECOWAS – UNHCR Ministerial Conference on Statelessness

Kairaba Beach Hotel, Tuesday, May 9, 2017

Mr. Chairman

Your Excellency the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations for West Africa,
Dr. Mohammed Ibn Chambas,

Your Excellency President of the ECOWAS Commission, Mr. Marcel De Souza

YOUR EXCELLENCY, ECOWAS Commissioner for Gender and Humanitarian Affairs, Dr.

FatimataDia Sow,

Your Excellency, Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Volker Turk;

Honorable Ministers responsible for nationality issues in ECOWAS countries,

Distinguished UNHCR Regional Representative for West Africa, Mrs. Liz Ahua;

UNICEF Regional Representative for West Africa, Ms Marie-Pierre Poirier;

Distinguished UN Resident Coordinator in The Gambia, Mrs. Ade Mamonyanelekoetje;

Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps in The Gambia;

Distinguished Colleagues, Cabinet Ministers,

Distinguished Representatives of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs);

Members of the Press/Fraternity;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I have the honor and pleasure to read this statement, behalf of the President of The Republic of The New Gambia, Mr. Adama Barrow. It reads: " I am pleased to welcome all of you to The New Gambia, the revived Smiling Coast of Africa and to this important conference that has brought us together to take stock of achievements, challenges and to chart out the way forward to eliminate an evil in humanity, namely, Stateless.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank ECOWAS and UNHCR for choosing our country, The Gambia, as the venue for this very important conference. My Government and the People of The Gambia are gratified by this honor and trust. Your honor and trust have come at a time when we need these most, because we are recovering from a difficult political situation, which would not have been solved without the support and solidarity of ECOWAS, the AU and the international community. Your spirit of solidarity and support with The Gambia and its citizens cannot be appreciated enough. Standing with us throughout that difficult journey, especially during the political impasse, under the exemplary leadership of Her Excellency Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and her dedicated and winning team, namely, Excellences, President Muhammad Buari of Nigeria, John Mahama of Ghana, MackySall of Senegal, Ernest Bai Koroma of Sierra Leone, Alpha Conde of Guinea, Conakry and Muhammed Abdul Aziz of Mauritania. Other equally supporters are the AU, under

Distinguished leadership of Marcel De Zouza and the international community, at large, especially from the entire UN system, the US and UK Governments, the OIC and civil society organizations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Turning to the purpose for which we are gathered here, let me say this: by organizing this event in The Gambia, you have shown the world that our country is back on her feet and is ready for business and its global responsibilities. You have also helped to restore the world's confidence in our country and its new Government.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During our political campaign, I and my coalition partners promised the people of The Gambia that we are committed to promote democratic values and principles, the rule of law, respect for diversity, human rights and social cohesion. We made this pledge and recently adopted a Compact on good governance, at a UNDP-organized three day Cabinet Retreat in partnership with UNOWAS, because we know how much our people have been yearning to regain their fundamental freedoms and human rights over the past two decades of political repression. It is important to say, that Gambians were also among the forerunners of the struggle for social justice and respect of fundamental rights in Africa and other parts of the world at large. It is important to note The Gambians role in these struggles earned the First President of this Republic of The Gambia the universal recognition of champion of human rights. It was also in recognition of this role that our country was eventually asked to host the African Commission for Human and Peoples Rights, the African Center for Democracy and Human Rights (ACDHR) and the African Union (AU). It is therefore, not an exaggeration to say that The Gambia is synonymous with human rights, despite the country's recent past history of oppression and human rights violations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we want to be counted as a country where human rights defenders find natural allies and friends in the Government, from the President to all members of his cabinet and the entire governance structures. Additionally, we aim to maintain and guard jealously our love for peace. Gambians are a peace-loving people and we recognize the value of peaceful co-existence among ourselves and between our neighbors. Peace and the respect for human rights are germane to each other. There cannot be peace without the respect and adherence to human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cognizant of my Government's resolve to rejoin the international family to end all forms of injustices in our humanity, the Government is resolutely committed to end statelessness in the country, in Africa and the world at large. We believe that, after 63 years of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on Status of Stateless Persons, subsequent human rights instruments and continuous dialogue at all levels, there are still enormous challenges to reduce this evil in the world, especially in Africa. As the former UNHCR and current UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, stated: "The daily suffering of millions of

stateless people is an affront to humanity. The persistence of statelessness around the world is thus a challenge that requires a concerted and holistic international response both at the political, policy and operational levels to ensure that this inhuman condition, where women and children bear the brunt becomes history

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference must build on the momentum of strong sub-regional, continental and international commitment to address the root causes of statelessness and not the symptomatic. According to ample research in this area, the root causes of stateless is conflict ranging from political crises, civil strife and war as well as ramifications, namely, terrorism. This Conference must therefore urge all of us stake holders who are yearning for peace and live in peace, at all levels, to adopt and effectively implement local and global dialogue as well as legislations, policies and projects in order to end statelessness.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the part of The Gambian, we are committed to join you in implementing the recommendations from this Conference in order to strengthen the commitment our country had made during the First Conference, the roundtable meeting for the regional human rights community, including the ECOWAS court of Justice, the African court for Human and People Rights, which were held in 2013. It is important to remind ourselves that these conferences culminated in The Banjul Declaration, which called on us, political leaders, policy makers and planners and project managers in ECOWAS member States, to take holistic actions to end statelessness.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the Gambia, I am pleased share with you that, from that 2013 meeting to date, our country has successfully made accessions to the two Statelessness Conventions, established efficient mechanisms and adopted a strategic National Action Plan to eradicate statelessness in Gambia, taking in due consideration lessons learned and best practices at all levels. These achievements have been interspersed with various capacity building actions both within and outside the country. The Gambia is currently working to have data on statelessness, which would have been completed had it not been for the political impasse in the country last year. We are also working on identifying gaps in our national laws in order to end statelessness, to make it a thing of the past within the coming ten years.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From our political history, you can see that The Gambia cannot allow statelessness to flourish on its soil. As many of you understand, a stateless person is one whose right to a nationality has been taken away. Deliberately, inadvertently or by the ills of poor governance. A person without any nationality has his or her fundamental human rights often violated and abused. He or she is denied his or her very existence as he or she cannot be identified. He or she does not belong as he or she cannot be counted as part of our community, society, nation or state. He or she cannot be counted as he or she is invisible and marginalized. In consequence, stateless adults cannot be employed as they cannot fulfil employers' basic requirements for a legal identity. They cannot open a bank account as banks would insist on their identity

Children without a national identity cannot attend school since their existence is not recognized. Simply, stateless parents cannot transfer any right to their children. The end journey is that when you don't have a nationality, you have nothing. Can we allow this to happen to our citizens? Can we deny the enjoyment of such fundamental rights to people living on this territory and who have a right to contribute to their society? My answer to all these questions is a big NO. And a NO translates into the inclusion of such members of our communities by affording them a national identity. As we know clearly, exclusion is a source of tension and tension leads to conflicts and strife. Our societies must be inclusive to avoid instability and future conflicts. It is precisely because we want peace that the leaders of our West African sub-region are hastening to eradicate statelessness.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me also take you back to some two years ago, precisely in February 2015, when the first ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on statelessness was held in Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire. The Conference concluded its work with a declaration (the Abidjan Declaration) committing the ECOWAS member states to eradicate statelessness over the coming decade. Therefore, this Conference in Banjul is the second in the sub-region that has devoted to eradicating statelessness. The ECOWAS Ministers responsible for nationality issues have gathered here to finalize and adopt the ECOWAS Plan of Action to eradicate statelessness from the sub-region by the year 2024. I have no doubt that our able ministers will adopt the draft Plan of Action that will be tabled before the ECOWAS Council of Ministers and the Summit for expeditious consideration and approval.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Gambia and its people count on its partners and stakeholders to help us re-entrench the culture of human rights and the rule of law in the various layers of our governance structures. Indeed, we need to develop our capacities that will allow us to adequately protect and promote the rights of our people. But these efforts, and for a country transitioning from two decades of political repression and mismanagement, we cannot do it alone. We need the expertise of others, where this is unavailable, and the financial support that comes with it to progressively make headway.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On this note, allow me to take this opportunity to salute the courage and determination of our sectoral ministers and their experts, as well as the international community and many other contributors for working hard to pave the way that will guarantee stateless people in our sub-region the right to a nationality. We have at least 1 million stateless people or at risk of becoming stateless in our region alone. No doubt, therefore, we are sitting with an emergency that calls for all our concerted efforts to respond to effectively.