

Statement by Mohamed Ibn Chambas Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) at the “Regional Ministerial Level Meeting for the Validation and Adoption of the Draft 8-Year Regional Plan of Action to Eradicate Statelessness in West Africa by 2024”.

9 May 2017 – Banjul, The Gambia

H.E. Mr. Adama Barrow, President of the Republic of The Gambia

Chair, Hon. Minister of Justice, Republic of Liberia

H.E. Mr. Marcel de Souza, President of the ECOWAS Commission

Honourable Ministers

Distinguished audience

Ladies and gentlemen

I thank you for inviting me to this Regional Ministerial Level Meeting for the Validation and Adoption of the Draft 8-Year Regional Plan of Action to Eradicate Statelessness in West Africa by 2024.

This meeting represents a crucial landmark in the progress being made by the ECOWAS, the UN in general and the UNHCR in particular towards the implementation of the February 2015 Abidjan Declaration of Ministers of ECOWAS Member States on the Eradication of Statelessness. I am grateful to you for inviting me to be part of this auspicious endeavour.

A lot of formal and informal consultations have gone into the preparation of this meeting. As we are aware, it is a follow up to the Abidjan Declaration of February 2015. That Declaration realized two key outcomes, namely, it highlighted statelessness as an important regional concern, and adopted recommendations on how to implement the commitments made by stakeholders. But the Declaration and its objectives did not constitute an end in themselves. They were a means to an end. And we should all consider it strategic that ECOWAS and the UNHCR have collaborated to take the Declaration a step further by calling this august meeting which should validate and adopt a draft 8-year plan whose implementation should contribute to the eradication of the phenomenon of statelessness

and its nefarious effects, some of which pose a threat to peace and security in the sub-region, undermine the efforts at recovery in some country, and threaten the respect of human rights and human dignity.

Chair

Honourable Ministers

Distinguished audience

Ladies and gentlemen

Let me recall that in 2011, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, António Guterres, then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, solemnly admonished member states to sign the two UN Conventions. He noted concerning stateless persons as follows: “These people are in desperate need of help because they live in a nightmarish legal limbo;” ... This makes them some of the most excluded people in the world. Apart from the misery caused to the people themselves, the effect of marginalizing whole groups of people across generations creates great stress in the societies they live in and is sometimes a source of conflict.”

Now as Secretary-General of the UN, Mr. Guterres still considers the eradication of statelessness as a priority of his efforts at conflict prevention, resilience, development and the promotion of human and peoples’ rights. It is gratifying that his appeal has been largely heeded, and I would like to commend the ECOWAS and the UNHCR for this meeting and its impending outcome. I commend them also for appreciating that the success of such an endeavour requires the collaborative effort of various stakeholders to make input in the form of the sharing of best practices and analysis regarding the causes and remedies of statelessness. It is equally significant that the two organizations have prioritized the need for experts’ review of their draft Plan of Action. Above all, it is commendable that sectoral ministers and other state officials of member states have consented to being present to discuss

this important document towards its adoption. I would like to stress that all these developments point to the ever increasing realization that many of the problems of individual member states of this regional organization can best be addressed only through a formulation, domestication and implementation of common policy frameworks on a regional scale. Only the solid ground of regional approach can ensure success in the endeavour to eradicate statelessness by 2024. All other ground is sinking sand.

Chair

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It is significant to note that progress on the eradication of statelessness has neither been steady nor easy. It continues to face several obstacles: administrative, legislative, logistical, as well as the lack of political will on the part of some key stakeholders. It is equally significant to reveal that women and children suffer exceptionally in situations of statelessness, especially under circumstances where cultural practices of state legislation prohibit women from transferring their nationality to their children, especially born outside her home country. Under those circumstances of inadequate buy-in of governments and the concomitant dormancy of international stakeholders, people in situations of statelessness continued to suffer the consequences of lack of legal recognition.

Chair

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In West Africa, the estimates put the number of stateless persons at 1 million people. There are also huge numbers who run the risk of statelessness. While

some have found themselves in this situation out of ignorance, others are in it and kept there by state legislations which deprive access to nationality on various counts.

In the context of the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin region, which has displaced 2.4 million people, including 1.8 million IDPs in Nigeria and over 200,000 Nigerian refugees to neighboring countries— civil documentation and nationality issues are a core concern. Similar issues have also arisen in the context of the crisis in Mali as well as in the situations of protracted displacement in the region.

The desperation resulting from such situations causes people to find ways around legal checks and barriers. They then get exposed to all manner of traffickers and illegal activities including drugs trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking and recruitment into obnoxious causes including terrorism. In the long term, such risks threaten peace and security and undermine governance, aggravate migration, hinder human right, mitigate resilience, and thwart efforts in development. I should add that the international community owes stateless people a duty of liberating them from these shackles because as Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton, an English novelist once said: “Personal liberty is the paramount essential of human dignity and happiness.”

Chair

Honourable Ministers

Distinguished audience

Ladies and gentlemen

Some of the desperation and the subsequent reckless daring which often threaten peace and security in West African own their origin or at least their aggravation, to the existence of statelessness. The peace and security dividends of the eradication of statelessness are, therefore, enormous. This joint effort by the UNHCR and ECOWAS towards establishing a common policy framework that elaborates concrete actions and timeframes to end statelessness in the ECOWAS region is coming at a propitious time. Its implementation should enhance regional collaboration and integration by

addressing a host of cross-cutting challenges. It should enhance efforts at peace and security, promote human rights, strengthen of resilience, and feed into the acceleration of economic development. When successfully implemented, the Action Plan should prevent the statelessness and redeem millions of West Africans from being vulnerable to marginalized living, exploitation by criminal groups, risk of human trafficking and political and religious radicalization. It will enhance the stability of the state. It will consolidate and put under one umbrella bilateral efforts such as the June 2016 'Abuja Declaration' signed between Niger and Nigeria for protection in the Lake Chad Basin to reduce the risk of statelessness among the displaced populations.

In view of this situation UNOWAS, within the scope of its mandate, supports the international and regional efforts being undertaken to eradicate statelessness in the next 10 years. For example, in place like the Lake Chad Basin and the border areas to which IDPs and refugees have fled across borders due to insurgency and terrorism, UNOWAS has admonished the relevant national authorities to ensure a proper documentation of persons in order to avoid them slipping into statelessness both now and at the end of the crisis. It is also in this same spirit that UNOWAS is committed to the Cameroun-Nigeria border demarcation exercise whose outcome should facilitate the identification of individuals on the basis of their nationality.

Chair

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The avenues for engagement will include the integration of the global development goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the fight against statelessness in conformity with the measures and mechanisms for implementation and monitoring of the Plan of Action.

It is for this reason that I would like to suggest that we put emphasis on preventive measures by prioritizing advocacy. This should in turn highlight research and early warning action, which should then underscore the

building of capacity of stakeholders to address issues including protection to stateless migrants and their consent for naturalization, analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, prevention of gender-related statelessness and other forms of discrimination, and the promotion of the required civic education and safeguards to the population.

I wish to urge this meeting to seize this opportunity and adopt this all-important document and to commit to ensure its successful implementation so that the region can effectively address many cross-cutting threats to peace and security related to statelessness.

I thank you all for your attention.