

STATEMENT BY HON MINISTER OF INTERIOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE  
GAMBIA AT THE 69<sup>TH</sup> UNHCR EXCOM MEETING IN GENEVA,  
SWITZERLAND FROM 2<sup>ND</sup> 6<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2018

Chairperson

Distinguish delegates

Members of The press

Ladies and gentlemen

I bring warmest greetings of friendship and best wishes from His Excellency President Adama Barrow, the Government and the people of the Republic of The Gambia on this auspicious occasion of the 69<sup>th</sup> Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. His Excellency wishes the meeting successful deliberations and he is confident that the conclusions will have meaningful impact on the lives of all refugees and other of concern around the globe.

We are greatly honoured to participate at this Executive Committee meeting in this wonderful historic city of Geneva.

Distinguished Chairman,  
Delegates

The Gambia, though small and with meager resources it continues to host over 8,000 refugees mainly from Casamance region in Senegal. We could not have managed this in isolation, it is with close collaboration and strong commitments from UNHCR and partners. More importantly the country remains peaceful which makes it attractive to refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants from the ECOWAS sub-region and beyond. Refugees are settled in both rural and urban areas which allows them opportunity to carry on their trades and professions as and when necessary. Most of the refugees came from the troubled Casamance

region in Senegal and arrived in the country in 2006, 2011 and 2012 respectively. The government of The Gambia, through The Gambia Commission for Refugees in partnership with UNHCR, continues to provide protection and humanitarian assistance for refugees and facilitate their access to various rights with the issuance of identity documents. The identification, processing and documentation of refugees are of critical importance to the management of refugee. Majority of the refugees would not like to return because of the uncertainties associated with the rebellion in the places of return, and repatriation is not advised therefore.

Distinguished Chairman,  
Delegates

The Government of the Gambia has been informed by UNHCR Regional Office in Dakar that the UNHCR office in the Gambia will be closed down by mid next year. We regret the closure of the UNHCR office in the country at a time when there are big issues in the security sector. We would like to convey our government's objection to the closure and to call on the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to revisit the decision and to keep the office until refugees are fully and legally integrated in the country through issuance of residence permit or naturalization as negotiated with the Government but pending due to the impending review of the Gambian Constitution and nationality laws. The Gambia is in transition to good governance and democratization and all hands including the regular presence of UNHCR are needed on deck. The processes to institutionalize a transparent and accountable governance come with enormous challenges in the governance structures, economic and security sector reforms etc. There is high turn-over of Government staff in particular staff of the refugee commission and the board resulting in loss of institutional memory and weakened capacity to manage refugee affairs and UNHCR support is also needed to manage the recently emerging asylum cases in a consistent and transparent manner.

The current trend of refugee and migration issues in the Gambia and the registration of new numbers of asylum-seekers is a challenge to the refugee commission and the authorities.

The Ministry of Interior responsible for nationality and refugee matters, in partnership with UNHCR, through the Gambia Commission for Refugees, has already started engaging the Constitutional Review Commission set up by our new government to review the Gambia's 1997 constitution. UNHCR and the Refugee Commission regular advocacy with the stakeholders will help to address the existing gaps in our nationality laws particularly for refugees who opt for local integration and naturalization. This is in line with Article 34 of the 1951 Convention to make the naturalization favourable as far as possible for refugees. Regular presence of UNHCR office is critical in facilitating the necessary technical support to the Constitutional Review Commission on the laws affecting refugees. Also UNHCR needs to keep its regular contact with the Ministry of Justice and other stakeholders reviewing the national protection instrument (Refugee Act 2008) with a view to reforming it to international standard in order to meet up with the current global refugee and asylum situation. The Gambia Commission for Refugees in collaboration with UNHCR office in Banjul recently embarked on nationwide refugee verification exercise, capacity development trainings, continuous registration of refugees and asylum-seekers, survey on mixed migration and are jointly conducting weekly counseling sessions. Early this year, the Commission signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Agency for Legal Aid to enable refugees and others of concern to have equal access to justice on pro-bono bases.

Distinguished Chairman,  
Delegates

On statelessness, we are happy to report that the Gambia has demonstrated the political will to address statelessness by the

ratification of the two UN Conventions on statelessness. This political will is also demonstrated by the country's participation in the drafting of the African Union Protocol on the right to nationality and the eradication of statelessness held in Johannesburg and Abidjan respectively. Consequently, a nationwide sensitization on the importance of civil registration for the prevention of the risk of statelessness was conducted. The Gambia Commission for Refugees collaborates with the Country Team on Statelessness, UNHCR and other relevant stakeholders to embark on awareness raising campaign to commemorate the first anniversary of the Banjul Plan of Action. Statelessness is a concern to us and we will continue to work with UNHCR and other partners to address the issue.

Distinguished Chairman,  
Delegates

We are deeply appreciative of the support from UNHCR and other development partners in supporting refugees and other persons of concern who are fleeing from persecution. I will at this juncture assure this gathering that, the new political dispensation in the new Gambia is willing and committed to uphold the principles of good governance and respect for rule of law. We thank the UN and the international community for standing by the Gambia in this challenging times

THANK YOU

Statement by the delegation of the Gambia  
69<sup>th</sup> ExCom, Geneva  
2 to 6 October 2018