

Opening Remarks of the Minister of the Interior of the Gambia

Hon. Mai Ahmad Fatty

ECOWAS-UNHCR Experts Meeting on Statelessness

Banjul, 7 May 2017

Mr. Chairperson,

Your Excellency the Regional Representative of UNHCR for West Africa, Ms Liz Ahua;

Your Excellency ECOWAS Commissioner of Humanitarian Affairs, Dr. Fatimata Dia Sow;

Resident Coordinator of the UN System and Heads of other UN Agencies in the Gambia;

Excellencies heads of diplomatic and consular corps in the Gambia;

Ladies and gentlemen of the Press;

Invited guests;

Ladies and gentlemen.

Allow me to welcome all of you to the Gambia and to this very important gathering. I have no doubt that you will feel at home and enjoy your stay in a country well known for its hospitality. One thing inexhaustible in the Gambia is our smile. Therefore, don't be surprised when you are smiled at everywhere you go. Indeed, smiling coast is another name for the Gambia.

We have gathered here today to address a very important issue to our region, West Africa. This issue is statelessness, or, otherwise said, the denial of the right to a nationality. This is a development issue, a human rights issue as well as a security issue. It is therefore a concern to the wellbeing of our community and the stability of our society. It has become an urgency for us to eradicate this problem.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Statelessness is an issue that holds us back in many ways. Yes, we have been living with it and we have been enduring it for many years, without necessarily

understanding its causes and its implications. Perhaps, this is because of our firm belief in our African oneness and brotherhood. We feel at home wherever we go in West Africa. This feeling of oneness often made us forget our nationalities and what our laws say about them. Our way of living is also another reason why we have underestimated the risk of statelessness. Our peoples are frequently moving across border, not only our nomadic population: Inter marriage are frequent; birth outside the parents' countries are frequent. This has been the practice from the days of our ancestors, well before the birth of our modern nations. This way of life creates situation where determining nationality become complex.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In our modern societies, nationality matters. Our legislations provide rules for the attribution of nationality. Unfortunately, these rules are not known to most of our people, and they differ from one country to another. A child born in an ECOWAS State, to parents originating from another ECOWAS State, can be born without any nationality. Weaknesses in laws and administrative policies governing access to our civil status documents add to the challenges. These challenges are common to every member States. This is why we are here today, to collectively address the problem.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A collective problem always calls for collective solution. ECOWAS is an institutional and legal framework to solve our common problems. And statelessness is a common problem. The objective of ECOWAS is to strengthen States cooperation and People's rights. Statelessness is an obstacle to this objective because it is an obstacle to the enjoyment of Human rights and integration. It is therefore a common problem to all ECOWAS States, and key concern to ECOWAS. ECOWAS provides a forum where we can discuss how to remove this obstacle and create stronger societies. This is why we are here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Gambia promotes inclusion, not exclusion. Statelessness leads to marginalization and exclusion. Therefore, we are resolutely engaged in the fight against statelessness. The Gambia has adopted a national action plan to end statelessness, we are now conducting a study to obtain a baseline on statelessness in order to refine our strategy. We have started education campaign for our populations to better understand statelessness. I believe we, member States, are all engaged to fight statelessness. In 2015, we adopted the Abidjan Declaration, a landmark document where we committed ourselves to end statelessness by 2024, in 8 years now. In the next three days, we have the opportunity to go beyond and adopt a Plan of action with concrete measures that will help us meet our commitments by 2024

Ladies and gentlemen,

A West Africa without statelessness will be stronger and more stable. It will create a path for growth and prosperity. We must be true to our commitment. West Africa can become the fifth region in Africa and in the world to adopt such a Plan of Action. I believe we, ECOWAS member States, can be a model not only for Africa, but also for the world.

With these few words, I have the honor to declare this meeting of experts on statelessness Open. I wish your deliberations a great success.