

Regional Ministerial-level Meeting on Statelessness in West Africa

**Remarks by Ms. Liz Kpam Ahua, UNHCR Regional Representative for West Africa /
Regional Refugee Coordinator for Nigeria Situation**

Banjul, Republic of the Gambia, Sunday 7 May 2017

ECOWAS Commissioner for Social Affairs and Gender,
Technical experts,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my profound gratitude to the Government and the people of the Gambia, for their warm welcome and hospitality in this beautiful city of Banjul. I would like to thank ECOWAS for the excellent partnership and collaboration, for their commitment in the organization of this important meeting, and for their trust in our continued support and cooperation.

I also want to extend a warm welcome and thanks to the technical experts present here today, who are joining us from every country in the ECOWAS space and to the other colleagues present. As so eloquently expressed by the ECOWAS Commissioner for Social Affairs and Gender, Dr. Fatimata Dia Sow, the fight to eradicate statelessness necessitates unprecedented cooperation. The concerted efforts of all actors are needed in facing this great challenge.

In 2013, the human rights community gathered in Banjul and adopted the Banjul appeal, calling upon ECOWAS, the Member States and UNHCR to act and adopt measures to end statelessness. We heard their call, and—here in Banjul in 2017—we have come full circle. Their appeal led, two years ago, to the adoption of the landmark Abidjan Declaration on the eradication of statelessness in West Africa. The 15 ECOWAS Member States committed, among others, to end statelessness by 2024.

The progress made since Abidjan has been significant. There is no shortage of examples. Three States have newly acceded to the international statelessness conventions. National action plans to end statelessness have been developed by 12 States, and three officially adopted, including one at presidential level. Reform of national legislation is underway in seven countries. It is without hesitation that I can say this region is setting an example, not only for the continent, but for the world.

We are gathered here today to work together on a next critical step in this fight—the review and adoption of the Regional Plan of Action to eradicate statelessness in West Africa. The Regional Plan of Action translates the commitments made in Abidjan into realizable actions, elaborating concrete measures and timelines to achieve these goals.

As the UN Agency mandated by the UN General Assembly to prevent and reduce statelessness around the world, as well as to protect the rights of stateless people, we remain committed to supporting the West African States and the region in the fight against statelessness. I am happy to see around the room UNHCR colleagues from our operations in nearly all ECOWAS states. We will continue to support these efforts, through the provision of expertise, and to accompany you in your aim to end statelessness in the region by 2024.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your presence here today is testament to the paramount importance of statelessness issues in the region. Statistics show that over one million persons in West Africa are stateless, while 60 million¹ people lack documentation proving their identity or nationality. Statelessness has considerable costs in terms of human rights, security, and social and economic development. It causes the marginalization of communities and their exclusion from mainstream society. Lack of

¹ UNHCR estimates that at least 60 million people in the ECOWAS region (20% of the total population) are without documentation proving their identity or nationality. Lack of proof of nationality is not the same as being stateless, but the absence of identity documentation, such as birth certificates, increases the risk of statelessness. This figure is an extrapolation of available data from some countries in the region and World Bank global estimates. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/54392>.] The World Bank estimates that globally 1.5 billion people are unable to prove their identity, which represents one in every five individuals, the majority of whom live in Africa and Asia and a third of whom are children. [See <http://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/id4d#1>.]

documentation impedes access to the most fundamental rights: a child may not be able to enroll in school, a man or woman may not be able to work lawfully or open a bank account.

The link between statelessness issues and peace and security in the region cannot be stressed enough. Statelessness can lead to instability and become a root cause of displacement. Displacement – whether caused by conflict or natural disasters—can also increase the risk of statelessness, which in turn becomes an obstacle to achieving durable solutions for displaced persons, preventing them from rebuilding their lives in dignity and impeding return and relocation.

The crisis in the Lake Chad Basin region is a prime example, where over 2.4 million people have been displaced by the conflict, including 1.8 million internally in Nigeria and over 200,000 Nigerian refugees to neighboring countries. Civil documentation and nationality issues are a core concern. Civil registration rates, including birth registration, were already very low in the region before the crisis, and most of those displaced lack civil documentation. For example, in Niger’s Diffa region, 82% of displaced persons lack identity documents. This has created many challenges, including in discerning between refugee, internally displaced and local communities, and impacting their access to protection and rights. In the longer term, this may hamper the achievement of solutions for the displaced.

I want to congratulate again the ECOWAS States affected by the crisis— Nigeria and Niger—for their commitments in the June 2016 Abuja Declaration on protection in the Lake Chad Basin, which echoes the Abidjan Declaration in its engagements to reduce the risk of statelessness among the displaced populations. Laudable efforts are underway to address documentation and nationality issues in the affected areas. Niger has recently initiated, with the support of UNHCR, an ambitious new project [Recensement Administratif a Vocation Humanitaire (RADH)] which aims to set up a biometric database for the entire population of the Diffa region.

Similar challenges have arisen also in the context of the crisis in Mali, and we see their long term effects reflected in the difficulties faced today in finding solutions to some of the protracted situations of displacement in the region. These examples are a reminder not only of the crucial importance of measures to prevent and reduce statelessness in the context of conflict and

displacement, but also of the necessity to address statelessness issues in times of peace to strengthen security and stability. We must act now.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Here in Banjul, we have the opportunity to mark the next milestone in the fight against statelessness in West Africa. Over the next two days, we will review in detail the draft Regional Plan of Action, which will then be presented for adoption at the ministerial meeting on 9 May 2017. Your expertise and knowledge are indispensable to making this next critical step a success.

UNHCR remains committed to supporting the efforts of the African Union, ECOWAS and the Member States. Together, we must make every effort to reach the goal set in Abidjan to eradicate statelessness in the region. The Regional Plan of Action represents a key step not only to address statelessness, but also toward greater integration of ECOWAS nationals. We have the opportunity to affect the lives of the millions who are stateless or at risk of statelessness in the region so that by 2024 every person in the ECOWAS space can say “I belong.”

I wish you fruitful deliberations and thank you for your attention.

Liz Kpam Ahua
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West Africa / Regional Refugee
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