



**KEYNOTE STATEMENT BY HIS
EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
SIERRA LEONE, AT THE REGIONAL
CONFERENCE OF ECOWAS STATES ON
ENDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING,
FREETOWN
- TUESDAY, 25TH APRIL 2023**

Excellency, Dr. Omar Alieu Touray, ECOWAS President,
The Honourable Vice President,
Madam First Lady,
The Honourable Speaker of Parliament,
Your Lordship, the Chief Justice of Sierra Leone,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Ministers of Government,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
Ambassador Cindy Dyer, Ambassador-at-Large to Monitor and Combat
Trafficking in Persons,
Stephanie Bunce, U.S. Embassy Charge d'Affaires,
Dr. David Okech, Director of APRIES,
Mr. Christopher Gascon, Regional Director, IOM,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good morning:

1. I am delighted to be part of this gathering of ECOWAS Member States and partners to foster deeper regional cooperation and coordination in the fight against trafficking in persons. This history-making conference is crucial because it underlines the importance of illustrating and appreciating the magnitude of the problem, mobilising all key actors, and galvanising collective action that keeps pace with the evolving nature of human trafficking.

2. No doubt, traffickers and trafficking networks are becoming more sophisticated and harder to detect. Previous speakers have indicated that they are deploying technology and using unethical business models and illicit financial flows to evade law enforcement. Global economic uncertainties occasioned by COVID-19, the geopolitical conflict that has destabilised global economies, the consequences of climate change, localised and cross-border conflicts, increasing poverty and unemployment rates, have all complicated our difficult efforts to develop and implement comprehensive action.

3. The trends in our sub-region are alarming. Our youth, who will drive that inclusive and sustainable future we aspire to, constitute the highest proportion of identified victims. I am informed that according to the most

recent UNODC report on human trafficking in sub-Saharan Africa, most victims are trafficked into forced labour. Of that cohort, the majority are children who are trafficked from rural to urban areas within their countries of origin and across ECOWAS countries, as beggars, for sexual exploitation, or into forced labour at mine sites.

4. These trends in human trafficking also show the inextricable link between human trafficking and migrant smuggling -- the latter being a major facilitator of human trafficking. This is a major challenge in Sierra Leone, where many young persons go on what is called "temple runs."

5. Putting all these trends into context, I note that our countries in the sub-region, at one time or the other, are countries of origin, transit, or destination. The porous nature of our borders, especially the unmanned border crossings, are key weak points in our regional border-control architecture. Trafficked persons may move across several ECOWAS countries to destinations in Europe, the Middle East, and beyond.

6. With the support of the ECOWAS Commission, sub-regional countries are working to strengthen domestic frameworks to combat human trafficking, to develop the regional plans of action, and to formulate the legal architecture to bolster cooperation among states. This conference will seek to build on those gains.

7. The key recommendations agreed upon here will inform the next iteration of the ECOWAS Plan of Action against human trafficking. As leaders in the sub-region, our priorities are clear. First, we want to bolster education and awareness raising at the community level on prevention. Secondly, we want to protect survivors by providing services in a dignified manner when they are identified. These include livelihood opportunities to restore hope and legal redress. Thirdly, we want to ensure that perpetrators of human trafficking are prosecuted to make it a risky and expensive enterprise for these criminals.

8. Within those guideposts, I believe that this conference can be an opportunity to explore how leveraging deeper cooperation could amplify our actions in all those three foregoing areas.

9. So, drawing on the expansive wealth of knowledge and expertise at this conference, I am confident that we can map out significant pathways on how to foster cooperation, share experiences on best practices, and discuss how to scale and replicate those actions both at the national and regional levels.

10. To my mind, the roadmap we develop here will be reflective of our aspirations to cultivate partnerships within and across borders, amplify our efforts by leaning on the private and humanitarian sectors, and to concretise how governments can work with other governments to address human trafficking.

11. This conference also presents boundless opportunities to collaborate across the region on information sharing, victim identification, and the provision of services to survivors. It is also an opportunity to strengthen the regional referral system and to intensify the rollout of the ECOWAS Biometric ID system that will facilitate the safe movement of people across ECOWAS.

12. My Government is championing this effort to shed light on human trafficking in the sub-region because of the lessons learned in the implementation of our efforts to quell trafficking in persons since I took office in 2018. First, we have focused on creating a simplified, holistic, and an enabling legal environment for rights-based issues like human trafficking to be addressed by the whole-of-Government. We realised early on the critical need to dismantle the siloed approach to addressing Trafficking in Persons.

13. We have instead built a strong rights-based social protection framework that is upheld by an ecosystem of laws spanning from the amended Sexual Offenses Act of 2019, the Anti-human Trafficking (TIP) and Migrant Smuggling Law of 2022 that replaced and repealed the old law, to the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2022. The Minister has also indicated that I unveiled the toll-free 134 Anti-Human Trafficking Hotline or FREEDOM LINE for use as a tool in victim referral and protection.

14. The Minister has also indicated that we now have Anti-Trafficking-in-Persons Taskforces in all the sixteen districts across the country. This is in addition to the National Anti-Trafficking-in-Persons Task Force Secretariat which now becomes a government sub-vented agency under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Welfare.

15. This focused approach allows us to better resource the fight against human trafficking in Sierra Leone, especially in the areas of prosecution and the provision of victim services, especially for women.

16. I recognise that criminalising and prosecuting trafficking in persons is insufficient to significantly tackle this menace. With sustained human capital development gains, especially for young persons and women, I believe we can reduce the push factors for trafficking in persons including chronic vulnerability and poverty. We have therefore focused on harnessing Sierra Leone's greatest potential, its people, especially its youthful and female population thereby creating opportunity. We must make a coherent effort across the sub-region to uproot entrenched socio-economic factors that exacerbate vulnerabilities in our communities.

17. Human trafficking, as every speaker has indicated this morning, is complex and multifaceted, and our solutions must tackle the problem with equally considerate actions that will ensure that these invisible criminal networks are dismantled. We must also build resilient and robust structures within communities to prevent human trafficking.

18. I am hopeful that the deliberations over these two days will chart a way forward for deeper cooperation among ECOWAS States. I look forward to the endorsement of the conference roadmap by the participating ECOWAS Member State Ministers and its adoption by the Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS.

19. With these remarks, I now formally open the Regional Conference of ECOWAS States on Ending Human Trafficking, 2023. I wish you all fruitful deliberations.