

We cannot begin to calculate the costs—human and material—which we have incurred as a sub-region from the conflicts that have raged unabated in some of our countries. It is incumbent upon all of us working together—as member states of ECOWAS and as representatives of civil society—to put this sordid chapter in our history behind us. We must take action now to see to it that West Africa and its peoples face a future in which regional cooperation, integration and development are real and attainable goals and where our children are armed with books rather than the weapons of war.

In order to do so, we must first commit ourselves to prevention of conflict. The Conference is providing the forum for us as a sub-regional organization to do so. It is my understanding that this meeting will devote its attention to the scope of the problem of war-affected children, to the implementation of norms and standards already set by the international community for child protection, and to the complexities involved in the process of demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of these children.

We are tasked with devising a practical plan of action to move forward the agenda to protect and secure the future of the children in this sub-region. I trust that we as leaders will be bold enough to commit ourselves to concrete steps to see to it that we attain this goal. I would like here to suggest a few areas in which we can take action at this meeting.

As representatives of ECOWAS member-states that have seen our share of conflict, we can commit ourselves as a sub-region to being among the first to ratify the Optional Protocol on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, raising the minimum age for recruitment and participation in a justifiable combat from 15 to 18.

By forming a critical mass in favour of ratification, we can indeed set an example for the rest of the world and help to gain global momentum behind this critically important protocol. As a bloc, we can also add our weight to the ratification of the Statute establishing the International Criminal Court, which will have the power to adjudicate on those who perpetrate the crime of utilizing child soldiers.

Secondly, we can incorporate within the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security a unit that is devoted to the protection of children affected by conflict. We can also commit ourselves to a more effective implementation of the ECOWAS Small Arms Moratorium.

We can provide our strong and determined commitment to do all we can as a region to help the children of Sierra Leone and Liberia recover from the horrors of those wars. In this regard, we can put our collective support behind the idea of calling on all parties in conflict within West Africa to observe a week of truce to enable the international community to provide relief and vaccinations to war-affected children. This initiative, while starting in West Africa, should aim to become a worldwide campaign.

Lastly, we can ensure that child protection is integrated into ECOWAS and UN peacekeeping operations by training peacekeeping personnel, both military and civilian, in field missions on the rights and protection of children and women.