

The magnitude of what we are witnessing today attests to a new phenomenon. There has been a qualitative shift in the nature of warfare. This is not war, as we have known it in the modern era.

Several developments mark this transformation. Almost all the major armed conflicts in the world today are civil wars; they are being fought among those who know each other well; they pit compatriot against compatriot, neighbour against neighbour. They are often protracted, lasting years if not decades; they are marked by widespread social breakdown and lawlessness, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and the involvement of multiple and often semi-autonomous armed groups. Most cynically, children have been compelled to become themselves the instruments of war—indeed the weapons of choice—recruited or kidnapped to become child soldiers. A key feature of this struggle is the demonization of the so-called "enemy community" and the orchestration of vicious hate campaigns. The enemy community is often defined in religious, ethnic, racial or regional terms. The traditional limits on the conduct of warfare—international instruments as well as local taboos and injunctions—are being cast aside. In this setting the village has become the battlefield and civilian population the primary target. This is soldier-on-civilian violence on an unprecedented scale.

These excesses are no longer exceptional, they are widespread across the globe; they are going on today in over 30 areas of conflict.

It is against this background that today up to 90% of casualties in ongoing conflicts around the world are civilians—this figure was 5% in World War I—the vast majority of whom are children and women. This is the world turned upside down.

This abomination is due in large measure to a crisis of values—a kind of "ethical vacuum"—a setting in which international standards are ignored with impunity and where traditional value systems have lost their sway.

We can and must reverse this trend of abomination. To do so, we must adopt serious concerted measures at the international, regional and national levels.

In this context, I should like to put forward some proposals for consideration within the framework of ECOWAS and West Africa.

## **1. International Normative Framework**

Since the founding of the United Nations over 50 years ago, the international community has developed a truly impressive body of international humanitarian and human rights instruments; the most pertinent providing for the protection of children affected by armed conflict are: the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Geneva Conventions and additional Protocols; the African Charter on the Welfare and Rights of the Child; UN Security Council