

Sadly, too, it is primarily our innocent women and our children who have borne the brunt of these fratricidal conflicts. Life and limb have been literally torn asunder and futures destroyed by the unnecessary and brutal conflicts that have burned across our continent. Sierra Leone, Liberia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Ethiopia/Eritrea—the list is long and tragic.

The most compelling aspect of these tragedies is that our children, who should ordinarily constitute our pride and hope for a stable and more prosperous future, have been deprived by war of the joys of childhood in a secure and loving environment and of the opportunity to employ their youthful energy and exuberance in positive and creative pursuits which would prepare them for a role as future contributors of our communities and nations.

Our children are not only victims of the atrocities committed during war, but also more horrifically, are actual combatants, conscripted by force into rebel and national armies, drugged, sexually abused and taught to kill with the small arms and light weapons that have flooded our continent. Even worse is the linkage between conflict and the deadly disease, HIV/AIDS, which is known to spread very rapidly in environments such as war in which the entire fabric of society has been destroyed.

This Conference is therefore, a timely and necessary action for we as Government leaders, servants of our people, and members of civil society to mobilize ourselves and send out a strong message to the world community that we are determined as a sub-region to put a stop to this madness.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not too long ago, our sub-regional organization, ECOWAS, broadened its mandate beyond economic cooperation to address issues of conflict and security through military operations and negotiations to restore peace in some of our member countries. The human and material cost of peacekeeping was high. Even though the situation in West Africa is much improved, the conflicts of the last decade have left deep scars which we cannot ignore.

We have all seen, either first-hand, or on our television screens, the horrors that women and children suffer during conflict. Many of our children have been lost to war whether in the front lines of military action or through the disease and starvation that characterise conflict situations. Many of those who survive are so traumatised and physically and psychologically scarred that they are denied the capacity to become responsible adults who should be preparing to take over from us and lead our people into the next century.

Child combatants are rarely to blame for the crimes they are forced to commit. The cynical and calculated use of drugs, fear and intimidation to turn innocent children into ruthless killing machines is horrible enough, but beyond that, we face the challenge of addressing the traumas they have experienced and finding ways and means of rehabilitating them. To this end, we must look to our traditions as family, religion and community-centred cultures and seek to employ every means at our disposal to see to it that these precious lives can be saved.