

I am recalling these events because the new definition of human security under the influence of Canada and the treaty relating to the total elimination of mines constitute precious instruments for the protection of war-affected children.

Allow me, therefore, Excellency, to thank the Canadian Government, through the Minister of Foreign Affairs, for having demonstrated, by organising this conference, its firm commitment to work towards the welfare of war-affected children.

Excellency,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are all aware that wars that broke out in the sub-region recently were either as a result of crises which affected relations between Member States, or due to internal political crises.

In every country of the sub-region that went through war, the fringe of the population hardest hit either because they were victims, or because they suffered more than any other group, is undeniably the section composed of children.

For these reasons, the holding of this Conference is commendable. Its timeliness is greatly appreciated by ECOWAS, particularly as our sub-region lost tens of thousands of its children during the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars and the crisis in Guinea-Bissau. These armed conflicts culminated in the mass exodus of the populations, which compelled Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone to host hundreds of thousands of refugees, the majority of whom were children.

Sixteen thousand Liberian and six thousand Sierra Leonean children were forcibly conscripted. A majority of these child-soldiers were most of the time subjected to alcohol or drug-use by those who recruited them, their instructors or rebel leaders.

And yet children in the sub-region are considered as God's gift and the greatest wealth. Full attention is usually paid to them. They are precious in West Africa and receive protection not only from their family, but also from the family of the entire community in which they belong. One of the primary repercussions of the indiscriminate use of children in wars is that it perverts our customs and morale which consider children and childhood as sacred. However, why does Africa forsake such a noble tradition which could have been imported to other continents as its contribution to world civilisation?

In order to facilitate understanding of the paradox that the serious breaches to the life, physical integrity and freedom of children constitute within the West African context, I have thought it fit to make reference to a United Nations report presented to the General Assembly in November, 1996, and to a UNICEF publication from which the following statements are extracted: