

## **YOUTH MIGRATION IN WEST AFRICA**

*Communiqué issued at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa (AECAWA) in Banjul, The Gambia, from 4<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2009.*

### **I. PREAMBLE**

The Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa (AECAWA), comprising all the Catholic Bishops of The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria, has since its formation in 1977 at Ibadan, Nigeria, always devoted a goodly part of its 3-yearly Plenary Assemblies to deliberations on a topic of vital importance and interest to our region. The last Assembly held in Freetown, Sierra Leone reflected on Christian-Muslim Collaboration.

This year, meeting in Banjul, The Gambia, from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> of August, the Association has thought it wise and indeed, necessary to examine the phenomenon of Youth Migration in West Africa. We consider this particularly appropriate as this Anglophone Association is in the process of merging with the *Conférence Episcopale Regionale de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (CERAO), its Francophone counterpart, to become one Regional Episcopal Conference of West Africa (RECOWA), to embrace the entire region in which youth migration has become a major challenge.

With prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit, we have carefully considered with the help of experts the facts concerning the situation and arrived at some conclusions, which we would like to share with the governments, Churches, other religious bodies and the people of the region. It is our hope that together with all these stakeholders, we will be able to map out a course of action to address and hopefully mitigate the negative effects of the upsurge in youth migration.

We know that migration is a universal human phenomenon and we see that it requires dialogue and prayer to deal with it adequately. We the bishops of AECAWA are aware that there are various types and cause factors of migration some of which are positive and can meaningfully contribute to development at various levels of human existence.

However, other types of migration have only led to negative consequences such as criminality, brain drain, spread of disease, estrangement from family life, human trafficking, prostitution, etc. Uncontrolled and undisciplined migration, coupled with the human trait of jealousy and greed, has resulted in antagonism and enmity among some nations of West Africa. In short, migration calls for a serious concerted action by the governments of West Africa, the Church and the West African youth themselves.

### **II. OBSERVATIONS, APPEALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is in this light that we the bishops make the following observations, appeals and recommendations:

#### **A. ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS)**

It is to be commended that the leaders of the West African region saw as early as 1970 the need for a regional integration which led to the Lagos treaty on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1975, creating the ECOWAS. Article 27 of the treaty affirms a long term provision to establish community citizenship. This community citizenship was to be implemented in two phases: the first phase was to abolish visa requirements and entry permits. This has seen the light of day. The second, the Right of Residence,

came into force in July 1986 when all member States had ratified it, but the Right of Establishment of this Residency protocol has not yet been implemented.

### **Taking Stock of Existing Laws**

We find it providential that RECOWA is replacing both AECAWA and CERAO at a time when AECAWA has thought it wise to deal with the phenomenon of migration in our region. There is need for both RECOWA and ECOWAS, at both the government and pastoral levels, to take a stock of national laws that militate against migration such as employment and investment codes that are at variance with ECOWAS protocol on capacity building. Immigration officials at borders need to be trained to see themselves as managing migration to facilitate rather than restrict movement. In this respect, a joint forum of RECOWA with ECOWAS to discuss migration matters is crucial to avoid the seeming growing misrepresentation, misinterpretation, ignorance and xenophobia against other nationals in our region.

It is absolutely necessary for ECOWAS nations to arrest the filthy corruption and bribery that go on both at immigration and customs posts. The practice of officers and authorities, stopping vehicles anywhere on their country's routes and molesting foreign drivers should stop. All nations must examine the practice of their immigration and customs officers implementing non-existent laws against aliens and stop it.

## **B. INDIVIDUAL COUNTRIES**

### **1. Need for Employment Generation, Good Governance and Conflict Resolution**

Generally, the push and pull of migration is when the economy is in a shambles. Economic downturn exacerbates poverty and hunger. Many people migrate in search of greener pastures because they must live. The indications above are clear: countries in the region become labour-receiving when the economy is good. Nations metamorphose to become labour-exporting when the economy is bad. Citizens of receiving countries are generally welcoming and accommodating to immigrants so long as their economy is strong. When the economy becomes fragile, economic self-defence becomes a necessity. Immigrants become *personae non gratae*.

It is within this context that our respective National Conferences of Bishops need to continue to dialogue with their governments within the region to desist from political corruption that thwarts national socio-economic development and breeds economic chaos, poverty and unemployment, which inevitably lead to the movement of people from one part of the region to another. Good Governance with respect to transparency in public administration, the good use of public funds, accountability to the people, desisting from discrimination based on ethnic origin, political and religious affiliation and justice to all – these are what make for peace, stability and abundance in any country.

It is important that various governments ensure that all structures of injustice are removed in all countries in our region. The dangers of terrorism persist. Experiences elsewhere have shown a correlation between migration and terrorism. While ensuring the respects of citizens' rights, care must be taken that criminal elements do not take advantage of opportunities offered for migration, especially in times of crises. Furthermore to avoid unnecessary hostilities, mechanisms for power sharing should be designed in our nations in order to obtain some measure of satisfaction for the citizens. As members of the new association (RECOWA), we commit ourselves to help in this exercise by training priests and religious to be sensitive to the problems concerning immigration around them. They should help to put a sense of pride in our citizens so that they would be able to appreciate what they have in order not to look elsewhere for ill-gotten wealth.

Above all, our leaders should eschew completely the evil of megalomania that breeds needless internecine wars and drives thousands of citizens into exile. We continue to pray fervently to the Lord that there would arise in our region holy politicians, both men and women, and that there would be saintly Heads of State who profoundly love their own people and wish to serve rather than be served (cf. *Ecclesia In Africa* [EIA] 111).

## 2. **Unemployment and other Social Ills**

The 1994 Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops called on African governments to establish the appropriate policies needed to increase economic growth and investment in order to create new jobs. This involves the commitment to pursue sound economic policies, adopting the right priorities for the exploitation and distribution of often scarce national resources in such a way as to provide for people's basic needs, and to ensure an honest and equitable sharing of benefits and burdens (cf. EIA 113). The Church must partner with governments to eradicate unemployment and create jobs, both in the rural and urban areas that would keep the youth from the temptation of deserting homes. In this regard we appeal to our universities and other tertiary institutions to be more responsive to the job market and review their curricula accordingly.

Both governments and the Church must take a very strong view of the frightening and increasing phenomena of child labour, drug trafficking and human trafficking especially of women and children that are showing their disastrous heads in the region. Countries within the region must seek to eradicate certain social evils and criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, prostitution and political intolerance that may be prevalent so as to prevent their spreading into countries that otherwise do not have them.

On the positive side, governments and the Church should embark on a programme of cultural, educational and sporting exchanges. This we hope will help to create better understanding among our youth and a deeper appreciation of the cultural heritage of the West African region.

## C. **THE CHURCH**

### 1. **Appreciating Human Mobility**

It must be stressed that human mobility is not only a fundamental right, but above all, it is an inherent desirable component of socio-economic development. We need to create awareness and to let the youth in our Churches realize the fact that many prosperous nations were built by migrant labour. This does not mean, of course, that there should be no controls.

We need to emphasise that managing migration within our region necessitates going beyond mere punitive measures, xenophobia and inhospitable sentiments against other nationals which seem to be on the ascendancy. We need to see the positive aspects of it and channel movements and migration of our peoples within our region to the benefits of the key actors: the migrants, the labour-receiving nation as well as the labour-giving country. Unfortunately, economic doldrums, hunger, poverty, political instability, etc., will make our people migrate from one area to another.

### 2. **Formation of Youth**

The Church in our region as part of a universal community of faith and love, where there is no freeman or slave, should make use of its Formation Centres: our Seminaries, both Minor and Major, our Catholic Universities, Youth Leadership Formation Centres, our Pastoral and Catechetical Centres, to break the colonial legacy of linguistic barrier and to correct our history to let our youth know that we are West Africans, first and foremost, and will remain so before being categorized as "Francophone" or "Anglophone" or "Lusophone".

With the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, "we know very well that youth are not only the present but above all the future of humanity. It is thus necessary to help young people to overcome

the obstacles thwarting their development: illiteracy, idleness, anger, drugs. In order to meet these challenges, we urge young people themselves to become evangelisers of their peers” (EIA 93). We consider pastoral care for youth to be part of the overall pastoral plan of our dioceses and parishes so that young people will be able to discover very early the value of the gift of self and essential means for the person to reach maturity. In this regard, we consider the celebration of the World Youth Day as a privileged instrument for the pastoral care of youth which favours their formation through prayer, study and reflection.

We consider certain types of forced migration as new forms of slavery. While we abhor all forms of hatred and inhuman treatment directed towards migrants in any part of the world, we are greatly disturbed by the new form of xenophobia and racism directed in a selected manner to migrants from Africa. In some parts of Europe for instance, some public officials are reported to have made statements aimed at instigating hatred towards migrants of African origin. We deplore in very strong terms those utterances that could lead to the violation of basic human rights of migrants and we call for a more hospitable, accommodating and humane attitude from all host communities. We urge the faithful in our different local Churches to be welcoming to people from other nations and make them feel at home. We call upon the faithful to develop good Christian families in which the children are formed by the principles of the gospel of Christ and are given enough opportunities to be able to overcome the temptation of leaving home for economic reasons when they are not adequately prepared for it.

**3. Establishing a National Framework of Stakeholders with our Respective Advocacy Groups of National Conferences of Bishops**

We see the need for us to collaborate with civil authorities to create economic and political situations that are conducive to the youth and their aspirations. The respective advocacy groups of National Conferences of Bishops within the region need to establish and to deepen a framework of stakeholders that will include, at the government level, such Ministries as Labour, Trade, Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Justice, and the individual departments of the National Conferences of Bishops, like the centres for socio-economic development, the department of Justice and Peace, commissions for migrants, etc, for a comprehensive programme on migration that will take into account short, medium and long term plans to guide our governments and National Conferences.

**4. Need for Public Education and Advocacy in the Local Churches**

There is need for dialogue and consultation, public education, concerted advocacy to halt the unwholesome hostility in the region against immigrants and refugees in our Churches – at the national, provincial, diocesan, parish levels and the outstations. Hostilities against visitors are certainly un-African. We are traditionally very hospitable people who are ready to share our meagre resources with people who come to us in need. We may be financially and materially poor, but as Africans, we are certainly not bankrupt in hospitality and kindness. These typical African values need to be inculcated as part and parcel of our pastoral formation for the youth in our respective dioceses. Indeed in response to the post Synodal document, *Ecclesia in Africa*, we need to educate our youth that in the Church of God, we are a family and that no one is a stranger (cf. EIA 43)

**D. THE YOUTH**

Now we would like to address a word to our youth. We know that “the economic situation of poverty has a particular negative impact on the young. They embark on adult life with very little enthusiasm for a present riddled with frustrations and they look with still less hope to a future which to them seems sad and sombre. That is why they tend to flee the neglected rural areas and gather in cities which in fact do not have much more to offer them. Many of them go to foreign countries where, as if in exile, they live a precarious existence as economic refugees” (EIA 115).

Dear young people, we your pastors consider it a duty to plead your cause: it is urgently necessary to find a solution to your eagerness to take part in the life of the nation and of the Church. But at the same time we also wish to appeal to you to take in hand the development of your countries, to love the culture of your people, and to work for its renewal with fidelity to your cultural heritage through a sharpening of your scientific and technical expertise and above all through the witness of your Christian faith. (cf. EIA 115)

As pastors, we advise you to obtain genuine documents when you have to travel outside your country and also not to use unlawful and dangerous means such as stowing away, using clandestine routes across the Sahara Desert, etc. Before you go to improve your education, you should be sure you have the requisite qualification for admission into an educational institution and the means to look after yourselves. You should abide by the laws of the countries you travel lawfully to. After your studies, you should return home to contribute to the development of your nations. Never should you go abroad for wrong reasons, such as drug peddling, prostitution, joining criminal gangs to steal or money laundering.

We invite students in our educational institutions at different levels in the region to initiate cultural exchanges among themselves in order to curtail this morbid psychological fear of immigrants.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion we invoke the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Africa and Help of Christians, for God's blessings on our efforts to prepare our youth for their future responsibilities in Church and society.

**His Eminence Peter Cardinal TURKSON**  
*President, AECAWA*  
*Archbishop of Cape Coast, Ghana*