

**OPENING STATEMENT BY PROFESSOR WALTER KÄLIN, REPRESENTATIVE OF  
THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF  
INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS**

**First Regional Conference on Internal Displacement in West Africa  
Abuja, Nigeria  
26-28 April 2006**

Honourable Special Assistant to the President for Migration and Humanitarian Affairs,  
Honourable Representatives of the Government of Nigeria,  
Honourable Representatives of the Members of ECOWAS,  
Distinguished Members of the diplomatic corps,  
Distinguished Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons and Co-Director of the Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, I join with those who have spoken before me to warmly welcome you to this conference on internal displacement in West Africa. At the outset, I would like to acknowledge with appreciation the Government of Nigeria for serving as host and to ECOWAS for its support in the development of this conference and for its co-sponsorship. I would also like to express my gratitude to UNHCR for its enthusiastic co-sponsorship and assistance in organising this event.

Of the some 23.7 million people worldwide who are displaced within their own countries due to conflict and communal strife, more than half can be found in Africa, and of these, more than 1 million are in West Africa. In addition to being the most numerous, Africa's internally displaced persons also are among the world's most vulnerable. Many are at high risk of ongoing armed attack, malnutrition, sexual violence and exploitation, enforced military recruitment, and disease including HIV/AIDS. Following the end of conflict, many struggle to return or to resettle and reintegrate in situations in which infrastructure is lacking and access to basic goods and services, including health and education facilities, remains limited.

As you know, internally displaced persons are people forced from their homes by armed conflict, human rights violations and natural and human-made disasters. Unlike refugees, internally displaced persons remain within the borders of their own countries. As such, it is primarily the responsibility of national authorities to assist and protect them. In this regard, it is appropriate that this seminar on internal displacement be hosted by the Government of Nigeria, as it is currently in the process of developing a National Policy on Internal Displacement. The development of a national policy or law on internal displacement is an opportunity to adapt the international standards on internal displacement, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, to the particular situation in any given country; it provides national authorities, in consultation with all relevant governmental and non-governmental actors, the opportunity to consider the particular protection and assistance needs of IDPs, the special vulnerabilities of certain groups and provides a mechanism for agreeing how best to address these issues. Based on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, these national policies provide an opportunity to reflect not only on how best to prevent displacement, as in the case of disaster risk management strategies, but also on how best to mitigate the negative effects of displacement

should it occur. Furthermore, they then can set out clear guidance on what needs to be taken into consideration by the governments in order to ensure sustainable solutions to integration, return or resettlement of the people once the causes of displacement are no longer relevant. Several countries around the world, including in Africa, have developed such a national policy, including Angola and Uganda. In this regard, it is appropriate that this seminar on internal displacement be hosted by the Government of Nigeria, as it is currently in the process of developing a National Policy on Internal Displacement.

It is also appropriate that this seminar is taking place this year, following only a fortnight after a meeting convened by the African Union to discuss the development of an African Protocol or other legal standard on internal displacement and also in the same year as the Great Lakes region has almost completed a process of developing its own legal standard on internal displacement. There is clearly momentum within the continent and sub-regions of the continent to give greater consideration to issues of internal displacement and to address displacement through the development of standards. This seminar in which we are all now participating is part of that momentum.

As the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, 'If left unaddressed, internal displacement may spill across borders and upset external and regional stability.' Certainly, there are many instances in West Africa where conflict and displacement in one country have embroiled other countries and even the entire region. Natural disasters can have devastating region-wide effects and cause great displacement. Although displacement is by definition a national phenomenon, it is true that the causes of displacement can affect a whole region, as well as its consequences. Research in other regions has shown amongst others that the economic fall-out for a society with large numbers of displaced and therefore large non-productive segments of society is immense.

Therefore a regional effort to address the phenomenon of internal displacement is to be welcomed. In resolutions the United Nations General Assembly and the former Commission on Human Rights have encouraged and welcomed the convening of regional seminars on internal displacement and the dissemination and promotion at such seminars of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the first international standards for protecting and upholding the rights of IDPs. Regional cooperation enables States to increase their capacity, for example, to run reliable early warning mechanisms and disaster prevention and mitigation systems. Regional-level discussions such as this seminar also can provide an invaluable opportunity to identify best practices and channel the lessons learned by countries coping with internal displacement into the creation of sound policy at the national and regional levels.

The Economic Community of West African States is one of Africa's leading sub-regional organisations and has increasingly become involved in issues of humanitarian concern, including internal displacement. At the ECOWAS Summit of Heads of State and Government in 2000, those present adopted a declaration welcoming the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and calling for their application by ECOWAS member states. In 2001 and 2002 ECOWAS, in conjunction with the International Organisation for Migration, held seminars on migration in which the issue of internal displacement was addressed. At the seminar in 2002, co-sponsored by my predecessor and the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, participants raised the possibility of developing a model law on internal displacement in West Africa. Finally, at the Regional Experts Meeting on Sustainable Solutions to Situations of Forced Displacement in West Africa held in Accra in June of last year, different issues pertaining to internal displacement were addressed such as the need for legal standards, the importance of ECOWAS's

advocacy role in the area of durable solutions and the need to involve refugees and IDPs in peace processes.

Our coming together at this seminar reflects our shared concern regarding the problem of internal displacement in this region. The diversity of participants assembled, including governments, non-governmental organizations, international, regional and sub-regional organizations, donors and researchers, bodes well for the forging of strong links and partnerships among us to address the problem of internal displacement in a cooperative and holistic manner. I very much look forward to our discussions and to the joint efforts that may emerge out of this seminar to address the problem of internal displacement and the plight of the many people it affects in the ECOWAS region.