

ECOWAS plans 5,000-man force to fight terrorism

The Economic Community of West African States Heads of State and Government are planning to institute a 5,000-man kinetic force to tackle terrorism in the region. This is as the regional bloc disclosed that 1,605 terror attacks had been recorded between January and August 2024 in West Africa, with a total of 6,956 fatalities. The President of the ECOWAS Commission, Omar Touray, disclosed this recently in Abuja at the International lecture organised by the News Agency of Nigeria. Giving the breakdown of the figure, Touray, who was represented by the Programme Officer, Regional Security Division, Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security, ECOWAS Commission, Isaac Armstrong, said Burkina Faso accounted for 611 attacks and 3,810 fatalities; Mali recorded 546 attacks with 1,424 fatalities, Nigeria, 238 attacks with 905 fatalities, Niger, 153 attacks with 676 fatalities; Benin, 44 attacks with 66 fatalities and Togo, 13 attacks with 75 fatalities. He said, "On the directives of the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government, efforts are ongoing to set up a 5000-man kinetic force to fight against Terrorism using the platform of the ECOWAS Standby. This regional resolve does not take away the responsibility bestowed on individual member states to take full ownership of their national security responsibilities "Undoubtedly, terrorism is the major security threat faced by ECOWAS member states. Initially confined to certain countries in the Sahel (Mali and Niger) and the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria), terror attacks have multiplied and spread to other countries (Burkina Faso) and are now a real threat to coastal countries (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo). "In 2024, from January to August, statistics from our Early

Warning and Regional Security data platforms show that a total of 1,605 attacks have been recorded in the region with a total of 6,956 fatalities with Burkina Faso accounting for 611 attacks and 3,810 fatalities; Mali 546 with 1,424 attacks, Nigeria 238 attacks with 905 fatalities, Niger 153 attacks with 676 fatalities; Benin 44 attacks with 66 fatalities and Togo, 13 attacks with 75 fatalities." In 2023, he noted that a total of 3,587 terrorist attacks were recorded in the ECOWAS region.

According to him, the attacks include about 2,000 in Burkina Faso, over 1,044 in Mali, and 500 in Niger. "These incidents have resulted in close to 9,000 fatalities: including 7,000 in the three Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Terror incidents in the coastal region include 177 in Benin and Togo that resulted in 203 deaths.

"In addition to the unbearable toll on human lives, insecurity continues to have dire humanitarian consequences. In just the three ECOWAS Sahelian countries, i.e. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, a total of 4.8 million people faced food insecurity, 2.4 million people were internally displaced, and close to 9,000 schools remained closed," he added. He stated that a disaggregation of the data shows that Burkina Faso had the highest number of food-insecure people, close to 2.2 million, followed by Niger with 1.9 million, and Mali with about 800,000. "Burkina Faso also accounts for the largest number of internally displaced people – about 2 million; while Mali and Niger each have close to half a million displaced persons. The number of schools closed stood at 6,000 in Burkina Faso, 1,700 in Mali and 1,000 in Niger," he added.

ECOWAS Parliament moves to enforce free movement Protocol

The ECOWAS Parliament has called on Member states of the regional bloc to ensure effective application of ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods and on the right of residence even as it called for sanctions against those who fail to implement the protocols. This development was contained in the report of the draft resolution of the ECOWAS Parliament on the implementation of the Protocol on Free movement, Right of Residence and Establishment in the region, presented to the Plenary at the just concluded Third Extraordinary Session of the ECOWAS Parliament in Lome, Togo. The report, which was considered and adopted, by the plenary and subject to approval, was the outcome of the Delocalised meeting of the joint Committee on Trade, Customs and Free Movement/ political Affairs, peace, security and African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), Social Affairs, Gender, Women Empowerment and Persons With Disabilities / Legal Affairs and Human Rights held in Banjul earlier in September. The Resolution tasked member states to "ensure the effective application of ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and goods and on the right of residence; adopt and effectively implement clear and adequate sanction mechanisms against member states and officials who fail to implement the community text; Reconcile the need for free movement, trade facilitation, and public security requirements."

A member of the joint committee, who presented the resolution to the plenary in Lome, Dr. Suleiman Abubakar, from Nigeria, told reporters

in an interview that the committee had recommended the elimination of the issuance of the residence permits in the region in accordance with the community texts. Abubakar, who was the First Rapporteur of the joint committee, said "We had a firsthand experience where we met stakeholders in the Gambia, and people from different parts of the West African sub region and heard from them directly about some restrictions on free movement. They are still being asked to pay money and this issue of residence permit came up. So, we have decided we no longer want a residence permit, all you need is to do a finger biometric and you become a citizen anywhere you want to be in West Africa."

He lamented that in some countries people are still being asked to pay levies even on goods as well as being forced to pay taxes at the border lines, stressing that the implementation of the protocol has been very poor. "We recommended that no more Residence permit in the West African sub- region. Anyone that wishes to settle in another member state of the region should just do a finger biometric. There are many other recommendations that will enable people to conduct their businesses across the borders without any hindrance," he said.

The Resolution also demanded that member states should accelerate the issuance of biometric identity cards and ensure its uniformity and accessibility to citizens. It called on member states to include modules on the Community text in the training of immigration and customs officers.

ECOWAS Parliament solicits support for women empowerment

The ECOWAS Parliament has called on regional parliamentarians to step up efforts toward ensuring West African women's financial inclusion and investments to promote female entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. Ibrahima spoke at the closing ceremony of the parliament's Third Extraordinary Session and Second Parliamentary Seminar in Lome, Togo. She said that the parliament was committed to addressing the myriad challenges militating against West African women, who are represented by the ECOWAS Female Parliamentarians Association (ECOFEPA). The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) reports that ECOFEPA had organised a symposium with the theme: "Financial Inclusion and Economic Empowerment of Women in ECOWAS subregion" to climax the event. According to Ibrahima, member states should ensure that women have access to the resources they need, such as bank accounts, loans and investment opportunities so they can realise their potential. "It is clear that women are change agents and they should be supported in the key role that they play, if we want to speed up the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

"Our collective responsibility is therefore to ensure that financial inclusion of women is not limited to access to financial services, but we must ensure it becomes a fundamental human right and a pillar of economic equality. "Clearly the path to true financial inclusion and economic empowerment calls for concerted efforts of all members of the society to drive policies that will foster equity to enable women overcome the obstacles facing them," the speaker said. Ibrahima noted that the path to financial inclusion and economic empowerment was a long process and solicited intensive advocacy for equitable opportunities that would enable women entrepreneurs to blossom. "Let us commit ourselves to the path where every woman will realise her full potential, where economic barriers are eliminated and financial inclusion is a reality for all. "This is how we can break the chain of poverty within our families and communities," she said. Also speaking, President of ECOFEPA, MP Veronica Sesay, said that investment and financial inclusion for women would make the subregion more prosperous and egalitarian, devoid of oppression and discrimination against women. "Entrepreneurship is the gateway to women's financial redemption. "ECOFEPA is pushing for more financial resources that will empower women to be economically independent and to pursue their political aspirations," Sesay said.

Dr Jewel Howard-Taylor, former Liberian Vice President and Secretary General, African First Ladies Peace Mission, said that women should leverage the Global Task Force to Empower One Million Women in the Trade Industry. According to her, the task force, which is an initiative of the International Business Leaders in Washington has opened more possibilities for West African women to benefit from. Howard-Taylor also urged regional leaders to ensure that West African women had access to credit facilities to grow their businesses. Closing the gender gap will trigger a 3 trillion dollars GDP growth rate around the globe," she said, quoting a report.

Members of the Parliament of the Economic Community of West

African States (ECOWAS Parliament) have expressed concern over the increasing shortfalls in the remittances of the community levy by some member countries of the regional bloc. Indications to this development emerged during the closing ceremony of the two-day induction session for members of the ECOWAS Parliament, presided over by the Speaker, Rt. Hon. Memounatou Ibrahima, during the 2024 Third Extraordinary Session of the 6th Legislature in Lome, Togo. The Director of Finance and Administration of the ECOWAS Parliament (DAF) Anna Jagne, had during her presentation, lamented that 2024 is the worst year in recent history in terms of the compliance by some member countries of ECOWAS on remittances of the levy, stressing that it has serious implications on the operations of the regional bloc. Article 40 of the Financial Regulations of ECOWAS outlines the Community Levy as the principal source of revenue for the Community. The levy is a 0.5% tax imposed on goods from non-ECOWAS Member States. It constitutes between 70 and 90% of the ECOWAS budget.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the induction session about the troubling development, Nigerian Member of Parliament, Awaji Inombek Abiante, attributed the difficulty in remitting the levy by some West African countries to the dwindling economic fortunes of the states and paucity of funds amid pressing domestic needs. He said "The issue of community levy is a direct relationship to the state of our economies. It is only when you have enough that the purchasing power will increase. But if you have an economy that is heading south; of course everything will head south. "And some member states might now begin to find challenging needs for whatever resources they have, making it difficult for appropriate and timely releases and remittances even when they have collected because there are other more exigent demands on them. "So the best approach on issues of this nature will be to continually strengthen our economic base in the region. But as long as our economies are moving southwards, contributing to the purse will be challenging and the demand for funds will keep on increasing."

Also speaking to reporters, Member of Parliament from The Gambia, Darbo Alhagie, said that more pressure should be mounted on countries that defaulted in payment. "We need to know those that have defaulted and ensure that at the level of parliament we can encourage our countries to pay the levy otherwise the implication will be dire on the operations of the Community." "If countries are not paying their levy, it is going to affect the operations of the Parliament and other ECOWAS institutions in general," he said.

Declaring the induction session closed, the Speaker, Memounatou Ibrahima, said the session was a milestone in the history of the ECOWAS institutions. "This session has deepened the knowledge of the functions and roles of ECOWAS institutions, the members of parliament and their privileges. We are the custodians of the aspiration of our people. These resources are a treasure for the work of the ECOWAS institutions and I express my sincere appreciation for your active participation and for your deep reflections," she said.