

The minutes of the First Conference of the African Diaspora Council in Switzerland (ADCS) Held on 12th September 2015 At the Universal Postal Union, Bern

Subject: The Mediterranean Sea Tragedies and their impact on Migration Policy in Europe

Moderator: Jordan Habia, member of ADCS

ATTENDANCE:

DIASPORA COUNCIL MEMBERS : Celeste Ugochukwu, President of the **ADCS**, Nabil Aït-Moktar - 1st Vice-president ; Joel Atakora - Secretary general ; Jordan Habia, Treasurer, Lamya Hemmache – head of the Council’s Working Group on Gender, Women and Culture; Cynthia Güntert, head of the Council’s Working Group on «Education and Health» ; Nafisa Ali, head of the Council’s Working Group on Youths and Sports. Members: Mess Barry, Mathias Ekah, Samson Kidane, Berhane Yohannes, Mamadou Diallo.

Altogether, the first Conference of the African Diaspora Council in Switzerland was attended by about **150 people**, in spite of the fact that access to public transport to the venue – the Universal Postal Union – was made impossible by a political demonstration organized by the Kurds in Switzerland.

Opening of the Conference¹

The President of the African Diaspora Council had the honor to open the conference. In his address, he thanked the contributors and participants for their presence. He said that he was speechless in view of the present situation in the Mediterranean Sea, and asked the assembly to observe a minute of silence in memory of the people who died there. He emphasized that the purpose of this conference was to express our view to the world and to know what the government of this country has to tell us about migration. That is what explains the choice of the contributors: dons who are preoccupied with the issue and decision-makers representing the government.

Jordan Habia thanked representatives of the Embassies of Ghana, Zambia, Ivory Coast and Angola for their presence.

2. Film

Lamya Hennache, head of the Diaspora Council working group on Gender, Women and Culture, projected a short, un-commented film on the situation in the Mediterranean Sea, leaving the images to speak for themselves.

3. Address of His Excellency Jean-Marie Ehouzou, Permanent Representative of the African Union to the United Nations in Geneva.

¹ The unabridged versions of the contributors’ addresses are available on the African Diaspora Council website : www.africancouncil.ch

In his extensive address, Ambassador Ehouzou stated that growth rates in many African countries are among the highest in the world, but that the youths have not benefitted from it. It is this discrepancy and conflicts that push the young people to flee (Libya). Peace is the primary condition for change. Thereafter, Mr Ehouzou touched on the main causes of these migration tragedies of which young Africans are victims. He stressed that the disasters have assumed alarming and disturbing proportions because entire parents and relations can be in one batch of migrants.

The causes of these disasters include discrepancies in African policies which make it impossible to find solutions to the problems, the criminal networks which board mothers, babies and children in the same makeshift boats and make huge profits out of the business. However, the remote causes of these disasters were slavery, colonization and endemic diseases such as Ebola, etc.

Honorable Ehouzou summed up the causes and effects by emphasizing that we are collectively responsible for what is happening today in Africa, in view of the fact that 34 out of 54 African countries are among the least advanced (very poor), whereas the continent is richly endowed with raw materials.

As regards solutions, His Excellency stressed that short-term solutions can be sought both in Africa and host countries. Such solution include abolishing visas among African countries, free movement of persons and goods, inter-African and international mobility; that would entail reviewing visa regulations and facilitating its acquisition, mutual recognition of certificates among our countries, promotion of education and training in the countries concerned, investing in decent jobs there, enlightening the people on migration and get non-African countries to help make traveling risk-free; recognizing the rights of migrants in the host countries, and combating the networks of human traffickers, collaborating with the Libyan authorities and helping them to stabilize the elected government.

Mr Ehouzou thereafter underscored the important role the Diaspora plays within the African Union which is why it is considered the 6th region of Africa. He thanked this Diaspora for its overall commitments. He also recalled that the African continent has the youngest population in the world, and that in a few years' time, 1 out of every 4 young people in the world should be African.

Finally, His Excellency emphasized that in the past, the African continent was the place people had always come to in search of solutions for the problems that existed elsewhere. He also recalled that as a result of slavery and colonization, Africa helped to develop the Western countries, but there was no Marshall Plan for the development of Africa, as there was for Asia. Moreover, he added, African colonial soldiers helped the West during the two world wars. Given these contributions by Africa, honorable Mr Ehouzou keeps wondering: "Why did the West not grant a Marshall Plan to Africa?" He further hammered out that the independence in the 1960s saw countries bled white, without social and healthcare infrastructure, while the international commitments towards development were not honored. He did not mince his words when he pointed out that today the 8th Millennium Goal on Global Partnership for Sustainable Development of the poorest countries which was particularly targeted on Africa was a failure and that its situation report will soon be made at the United Nations. However the African Union Agenda 2075, adopted at the Conference of Addis Ababa, to promote prosperity, integration on the continent and focus on the fixing migration is a sign of hope to Africans.

4. Projection of a film: the interlude between the preceding presentation and the next one focuses on the causes of migration.

5. Presentation by Dr André Loembe : « The Causes and the effects of Conflicts in Africa »

In his presentation, Mr Loembe recalled that the present situation is reminiscent of past tragedies and that the Mediterranean Sea has become the biggest cemetery for Africa's children. While thanking the conference organizers, he recalled that these tragedies are a repetition of history and not isolated incidents, stressing that there is no effect without a cause, and that the ferrymen being incriminated are only but scapegoats, demanding that the real facts of these tragedies be addressed. Thus, the causes of present-day migrations are multiple and complex and are not isolated incidents at all. They include:

- 1) Endogenous causes for which Africans themselves are responsible. They are related to power struggles beginning with arms and then legitimized by elections the dates of which are fixed from outside.
- 2) Exogenous causes which are political and economic (foreign interventions): for instance, maintaining French military bases in West Africa after the independence, and the freedom which this army had to travel within and in between countries made it possible to monitor powers that be, and to control and loot resources by means of arms. To these are added the harmful role of the CFA which impedes Africa's financial independence, the arrests or assassinations of African politicians. As regards the CFA, Dr Loembe stressed that this African money of the French African Community belongs in fact to the French Central Bank, and that with a 1€ = 656 CFA exchange rate, Europe gets raw materials almost free of charge, and that hinders Africa's financial autonomy, making it difficult to create bases for its development. The heads of state who dared to negotiate with foreign powers to create their own currencies were removed from power (for instance Gbago, Ghadafi with his African satellite project that was to be headquartered in Abuja, in Nigeria).

Such situations lead to the control and looting of natural resources and to the impoverishment and destabilization of Africa to the advantage of arms producers, foreign dictators and multinationals. As long as these problems persist, there will be no solution to Africa's migrant disasters or to the financial dependence of African countries of the CFA zone.

Mr. Loembe rounded up his address reminding the audience that « we can change this reality if we have the will to act together.

6. Ahmed's Account. Ahmed, a refugee from Somalia, gave an emotional account of his journey to Switzerland. He said he crossed three countries (Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya) before arriving to Europe. He said that he had not had good education or training in Somalia. Choked by emotion, he said that he could not tell it all here.

7. Presentation by Mr Etienne Piguet, professor at the University of Neuchâtel: "Swiss and European Migration Policy: the Great Challenges"

In his presentation, Mr Piguet recalled that Europe has for long sought to harmonize its asylum policy. Given the current situation, it is looking for a unified response. Switzerland has promised to be part of it, even though there has not been a unanimous agreement within the Federal Council (Federal Government).

He emphasized that in the 1960s during the cold war period, there were a few asylum-seekers (5000 – 45000 per annum), and that it was not difficult for Europe to agree on taking in and sharing Hungarian refugees (1956) and those from Czechoslovakia (1967-68). The geopolitical changes and the increased applications for asylum in the 1980s made things more difficult. However, the peaks reached during the wars in the Ex-Yugoslavia are an indication that the present situation is not new because Switzerland had had to cope with an average of 25000 asylum-seekers per annum. Although the rise continued, moving from 300'000 to 600'000 asylum-seekers between 1990 and 2015, Switzerland has been able to contain it, compared with what obtains in some European countries. Mr Piguët recalled that Germany and the Scandinavia have taken more than half of the asylum-seekers in Europe. Greece, Italy and Cyprus also receive a lot of asylum-seekers, but the refugees pass leave those countries on their ways to other European countries.

In spite of the progress recorded in Europe (the 1990 Dublin Convention, the 2009 Lisbon Treaty), there remain two major sources of imbalance: the geography of the arrivals (almost half of the 660'000 applications for asylum filed in 2014 were recorded in Germany, Italy and Sweden) and the difference in rate at which different countries accept the initial applications. This lack of harmonization is one of the causes of the present problems. The European Commission stipulates a factor for distribution based on some criteria but that factor ought to be backed by one central European authority and followed by a clarification as to who would be beneficiary. The message that the door is now widely open should be avoided. Sources of access other than the sea should be guaranteed.

In relation to its population, Switzerland accepts more refugees than stipulated this distribution factor, but it is a rich country and can afford to do more. It is hoped that it will fully participate in decision-making at the European level.

8. Salvatore Pitta's account « Watch the Med »²

In his address, Mr Pitta explained that "Watch the Med" is a platform for taking the inventory of the deaths and violations of migrants' rights perpetrated along the European Union sea barriers. Its sphere of operation is the Mediterranean and the Canaries. It has one phone number as well as regional groups. Its first action (counting of ships) took place in 1992; it became operational since October 2014, and for Switzerland since January 2015.

«Watch the Med» also operates thanks to its boat «The Sea Watch» which navigates the Libyan territorial waters: 89 phone calls received between 2nd August and 2nd September 2015 from small boats made it possible to save thousands of lives. In June 2015, The Sea Watch provided first aid services in the form of drinking water and life jackets before the Frontex boats arrived.

The zone covered has become the most frequently controlled space by NATO, Frontex, Eurosur), yet people continue to die. Europe's responsibility is involved, given the fact that it is no longer possible to seek asylum at the embassies. "Watch the Med" expects assistance from the ambassadors present at this gathering, because it is no longer time to keep quiet, but to apportion responsibilities. In conclusion, Mr Pitta said the time has come to tell the truth, the truth has to be told to the European politicians, and that it is time to determine who is responsible for what. He militates for immigration without border, without tear and without visas.

²www.alarnphone.ch

One number irrespective of the origin of calls: ++ 334 86 51 71 61

9. Projection of a film about 13000 deaths which occurred since 2002 and the failure of such operations as Mare Nostrum and Triton, and comes to the conclusion that legal migration is the answer. “It is Pitching and We are Afraid”

10. Presentation by Mr Sylvain Astier of the Swiss Agency for Migration: “The Swiss Migration Policy”

In his presentation, Mr Astier emphasized that the number of refugees rose tremendously between 2003 and 2014, particularly asylum-seekers from Eritrea, thus doubling the size of the African diaspora in Switzerland. As regards the labor market, half of the applications for employment were from North Africa. In 2015, 120000 of the 430000 who came to Europe passed through Italy, which is the route leading to Switzerland. 6 to 7 % of Africans have been naturalized. Most of the applications for Swiss visas are from South Africa and Egypt.

Internally, this creates integration and accommodation challenges for Switzerland, making it imperative to take into consideration the internal policy, the media interest and the public opinion, and externally, the coherence of the migration policy and the improvement of bilateral cooperation.

The Swiss migration policy is conceived in a global manner both for the countries concerned and the government. It involves partnerships with countries of origin (e.g. Nigeria, Tunisia) and by a coherent approach and dialogue. Its implementation depends on the political situations in third countries and the nature of bilateral, economic and migration relations with Switzerland. It comprises different types of projects designed to check irregular immigration (development, training, etc.), local protection, return assistance or capacity-building. Mr. Astier highlighted the police cooperation between Nigeria and Switzerland, as well as micro-credit projects in Guinea and capacity-building for Guinean diplomats in Switzerland.

The perspectives are mutual for both Switzerland and the countries concerned: to strengthen interdepartmental cooperation, maintain dialogue, step up negotiations, nurture existing partnerships and initiate new dialogues and adapt the migration agenda to that of the European Union.

11. Samson Kidane’s account

It is not easy for Samson Kidane, an Eritrean refugee who has been in Switzerland for 7 years, to address this audience. He wants to forget what he went through and at the same time be the voice for those who are suffering and dying. After giving an overview of the situation in his country, he told of how he fled through Sudan, Libya, the Mediterranean Sea, and Italy with series of difficult incidents and events.

12. Mathias Ekha’s presentation on the Impact of the European Migration policy on Switzerland.

Mr Mathias Ekha briefly presented an image typical of migration disasters with a small boat overfilled with migrants. He is of the view that it is impossible to stop the current immigration. He presented the EU migration statistics which change daily (447000 immigrants recorded recently).

Next, Mathias Ekah made a thorough analysis of the direct causes of the current migration problem, namely human trafficking and sex business (80% of Nigerian women who come to Europe do so for prostitution), torture that asylum-seekers are subjected to in the Middle East (Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, etc.), the problems faced at

Calais by migrants trying to move to England. He stated that the first impression people have of an African in Europe is that of a person in exile.

In reflecting on the solutions to these problems, Mathias Ekha recommends that visas be applied for at the Western embassies. Another solution would be to facilitate work permits for migrants, as is the case in Denmark, so that they can be rapidly integrated and be able to cater for their families in Africa, or bring them later. As far as he is concerned, Europe stands to benefit from migrant labor. However, he stated that statistics show that there are not many qualified Africans in Europe.

13. Questions and answers³

Question 1 to H.E. Mr J.M. Ehouzou: Why take us for children and speak the language of the diplomats?

Answer: I came here in response to a precise request by the Diaspora Council. I have no intention to get into a controversy

Question 2 to Mr Astier: How is the situation about the free legal assistance in the new asylum procedure?

Answer: free legal assistance was a decision taken to shorten the duration of the procedure. The Swiss Office for Aid to Refugees (SOAR) is mandated to choose lawyers.

Question 3 to Mr. Astier: what is the place of education in the policy of the Swiss Office for Migration (SEM)?

Answer: The SEM has always tried to take this issue into consideration. However, our partners are sovereign states, and we cannot impose it

Question 4: To the Diaspora Council: How come there are no women? Since most of the contributors are male, is this not some form of discrimination?

Answer 4: There is no discrimination at all. In fact we even invited more women than men at the preparatory stage. Unfortunately, all the women invited excused themselves, a situation that left us with only men and we must show our appreciation to them that made it.

Remark: the contributors confuse migrants with refugees.

Light refreshment was offered at the end of the conference to enhance contacts and exchanges.

Done at Bern, on 18 September 2015

Joel Atakora
Secretary general ADCS

Anne Roth-Laurent
Rapporteur

³ Due to an on-going demonstration and public transport problems, the conference started 40 late. Discussion podium is cancelled because the hall must be left at the agreed time.