



## IRIN INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMED IBN CHAMBAS, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF ECOWAS

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The executive secretary of the Economic Community of West African States, Mohammed Ibn Chambas, spoke to IRIN about various issues pertaining to West Africa and African integration during the African Development Forum, held on 3-8 March in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Chambas, who became the head of the regional integration organisation in mid-February, spoke at length about the challenges facing the community, including peace and security.

**QUESTION:** Dr. Ibn Chambas, you've just taken up the post of executive secretary of ECOWAS. What do you see as the main challenges facing you and the organisation?

**ANSWER:** We have taken over ECOWAS at a time of high expectations among the people of the subregion, among the member countries, about the prospects for integration in the subregion. People want to be able to move about freely, engage in legitimate business, seek opportunities in neighbouring countries. They believe that ECOWAS was established precisely for that purpose so they expect ECOWAS to facilitate free movement of persons, goods and services.

Countries now, more and more, are appreciating the need to band together with others in order to take advantage of economies of scale, in order to face global competition, in order to create greater opportunities for free movement of capital, to facilitate private sector growth, and all of these I believe, are legitimate expectations. These are practical things that people expect of ECOWAS and the ECOWAS Secretariat should work harder to have them realised.

**Q:** What has prevented free movement of people from being fully realised?

**A:** There are a number of factors, historical, institutional, and human frailties. The historical factors we know: the artificial borders which we inherited from the colonial period. These have been real impediments to integration in the subregion. Then you have

various institutions such as customs, immigration, gendarmerie and others who have been slow in realising the urge of the peoples of our subregion to be able to move around freely, indeed as their forefathers did, to take advantage of opportunities for personal improvement, business activity etc. When I talk of human frailties I'm referring to petty corruption on the borders, road blocks which are raised - not for legitimate reasons - and where monies are extorted, and this creates a hassle for the ordinary people going about their normal business activities.

Q: So even when there are agreements at the political level, there are impediments on the ground?

A: Yes, in spite of the efforts of political leaders, in spite of agreements and protocols on free movement, we have these problems on the ground. These are the things each country should take responsibility for and work hard to remove because they stand in the way of the achievement of genuine free movement of persons, goods and services. In that sense, then, they hinder trade liberalisation, which is one of the key things which we have to work for in our subregion. Right now the estimates are that intra-regional trade among West African countries is lower than 10 percent of our trade. That should be much higher in a free-trade zone, in a regional grouping designed to bring all the countries under one umbrella, so to speak. So the problems at the borders need to be dealt with seriously to facilitate free trade in the subregion.

Q: Another issue that has attracted quite a bit of attention is the issue of insecurity in West Africa. ECOWAS has some experience in dealing with this, through ECOMOG, for example. What are the main lessons one can derive from ECOWAS' experience in this area?

A: The ECOWAS experience has been a very good one. We know the contribution that ECOWAS made to bring about peace in Liberia, for instance. We know the role ECOWAS played to reverse the coup d'etat in Sierra Leone. So there is no question that, as a subregion, we have demonstrated the type of military cooperation which was necessary in times of high crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Of course, there were tremendous difficulties, both in terms of the logistical and financial implications for member countries and in terms of some genuine problems which may have come from, perhaps, inadequate training of troops. But these are lessons which we should take on board. For future operations, we need to think through carefully the funding arrangements, we need to ensure that there is an ongoing training programme to properly equip our forces, particularly in peacekeeping operations. It's a specialised field and should not be taken for granted. They should not just be rushed into a situation when they are probably not trained for peacekeeping.

But I think, fundamentally, what we also need to be addressing are some of the underlying factors which cause conflict in the first place so our preemptive, preventive approaches need to be more focused. We need to address issues of lack of respect for the rule of law and human rights of citizens, lack of inclusiveness in governance. We need to

encourage countries to work towards greater reconciliation and the creation of a genuine sense of nationhood. If that is done, I think some of the underlying causes of the conflicts would then also have been taken care of while, at the same time, we prepare ourselves as a subregion to deal with defence and security matters when they arise.

Q: Does ECOWAS intend, then, to strengthen its early warning and conflict prevention capacity?

A: Yes, we've been working on this and, with the support of the European Union we now have four posts opened within the context of our early warning mechanisms. These are surveillance and monitoring units. We've divided the subregion into four zones, each with an office, and the intention is to collect data and monitor developments in all our countries - but perhaps particularly in areas with high risk in terms of defence and security issues - stay on top of issues, and take those measures which can prevent the worsening of situations.

Within that context, I can tell you for instance that we are working very hard to encourage a national reconciliation conference in Liberia because the signals are there, of a worsening security situation in that country, caused on the one hand by friction and distrust among the Mano River Union countries, principally Liberia and Guinea. Of course there is also Sierra Leone. We are all very happy about the progress being made by Sierra Leone and we want to work hard to consolidate that process and to avoid at all cost a reversal of this positive development in Sierra Leone. So we would like to see greater consultation, communication and dialogue among the Mano River countries, but internally, there is rebel activity in Liberia and there are several Liberian opposition elements who are in exile, and who claim they are unable to go back to their country. That's quite a hurtful situation. So we are working very closely with the Liberian government to facilitate the process of national dialogue so that the government will be encouraged to take those measures that can ensure that opposition elements will be guaranteed their security, that they will be able to engage in legitimate political activity. All of this, we hope, will lead to the convening of a national reconciliation conference in Liberia so that Liberians can sit among themselves, table issues that are pertinent and need to be addressed in an open, transparent manner just to reinforce a sense of security among all the Liberian people.

Q: Who will be involved in the dialogue that you are preparing and have any dates been set?

A: Yes, dates have been set- the 14th, 15th and 16th of March in Abuja. The government of Nigeria has agreed to host these meetings and I, personally, have been in touch with the Liberian authorities who are also in agreement that we should hold preparatory talks in Abuja, bring together the Liberian government and the political opposition based in exile so that they themselves can plan this national reconciliation conference in Liberia. Various issues, hopefully, will be raised which need to be addressed and we believe these ought to be addressed in earnest by the Liberian government to give confidence to those who are in exile and those who are engaged in illegitimate, violent actions to overthrow

the government, to appreciate the fact that the way for them to air and seek redress for their grievances is through political dialogue in Liberia at the national reconciliation conference and not in the bush. And we hope this process will lead to the stabilisation of the situation in Liberia so that peace can be built further and create conditions in Liberia for reconstruction.

Q: How do you see integration, not just in West Africa but in Africa as a whole, contributing to the development of a climate of peace and security on the continent?

A: Integration enables us to share experiences, to lean on each other. Many of the problems relating to peace and security involve a situation where a particular country is unable by itself to build conditions of peace and stability for its people. In the context of the wider subregion, the support mechanism is there for neighbours to help because if neighbours stand aloof the problems of one country become theirs, become the problems of the subregion. Its conflicts will spread, people will become refugees, and you have to take care of them, provide for their education, provide for their support, so I believe the integration process is one way in which we can in fact help to deal with the problems of insecurity faced in various countries.

Also, through this wider form of regional integration. Peer pressure comes to bear when certain norms are set, community standards, minimum norms for governance, respect for the rights of citizens, their right to participate in government. As you know, in West Africa and all of Africa, we have set clear standards for constitutional democratic governance and said that those who come to power through unconstitutional, violent, means will not be recognised, will simply not be admitted to the club. I think that raises the bar and imposes upon political groups, a new standard for accepting democratic norms and that in turn, in my estimation, builds the precondition for peace and stability in our respective countries.

Q: Civil society has a key role to play where this is concerned. What provision has ECOWAS made or does ECOWAS intend to make for the involvement of civil society in its activities?

A: I should admit that that is one area where ECOWAS could improve on its past performance and we do intend to do that. Incidentally, under the revised ECOWAS treaties, there is supposed to be an economic and social council, and this is a forum that would have involved greater civil society participation in the activities of ECOWAS. Clearly we see that the private sector, for instance, should be given a greater role in our subregion in the integration process because, through their increased activity, through their ability to transact business across the subregion, they will bring about practical integration in our subregion.

But the other civil society organisations need to be brought more and more into the fold. On the women's front, there is the West African Women's Association, WAWA, which in fact participates in ECOWAS activities, attending summits (they are heard at all summits) but we should work more with the youth, students and civil rights organisations, quite frankly, in some areas where we need to see greater activity. Civil

society participation enhances the role of ECOWAS. It fosters greater public awareness about ECOWAS, its activities, and it brings home to the ordinary people the fact that ECOWAS is for the people of West Africa. It's not an organisation of presidents, ministers and officials. It's ultimately designed to improve the lot of the ordinary person in West Africa. So I think we can expect to see greater involvement of civil society organisations in ECOWAS in the years to come. I think the day is not too far when one can, for instance, see as normal the convening of civil society meetings parallel to ECOWAS summits, ministerial meetings, in much the same way as you find at the United Nations, and now, even at the OAU. We also will keep pace with this trend which, I believe, is a process of empowering our people directly in tune with activities and, in many instances, even to define the agenda for the subregion.

Q: You mentioned EU support for early warning. What about the UN? What cooperation is there at the regional level with the UN?

A: Indeed, I should mention that ECOWAS is increasingly building partnerships with many international - both multilateral and bilateral - partners and, in that regard, we work very well with the UN system. Even within the context of ECOMOG, we enjoyed tremendous support from the UN and, particularly in Liberia, from the United States. In Sierra Leone, we again worked closely with the United Nations and with the United Kingdom, but we've also, for instance, recently worked out some partnerships with the World Bank and IMF which have come up with their regional integration strategy programme, which we find a great opportunity to increase our cooperation with the Bretton Woods institutions in the area of infrastructural development, in the area of cooperation, for instance in the energy sector, in the development of our road and railway network, in the area of information and communication technology, and so the prospects are very bright for expanding relations with many partners. We want to work very aggressively to tap this sort of support to the subregion to see how that can also push the process of integration.

Q: You mentioned cooperation in Liberia during the war, but it has been said that ECOWAS' peacekeeping effort did not receive the type of support, especially material support, that one would have liked to see.

A: At many points in the process of setting up ECOMOG and deploying ECOMOG in the field, the constraints of the subregion were felt, principally in the area of lack of adequate financial and logistical facilities. We could have, and I know that many countries wanted to, increase the number of troops participating in the process but they either lacked the means of transport to bring the troops or even the financial means to maintain the troops if they had arrived to participate in ECOMOG. This is one area where the international community can always come in, to supplement, to complement the efforts of the subregion. Some of that happened, as I mentioned, in Liberia - the United States provided some support, the United Nations was there - and in Sierra Leone, but the fundamental problem remains. Armies are not as resourced as we would want them to be. We are developing countries and we have many other pressing demands on our budgets, so I think for future purposes the area of cooperation with the international community in

defence and security matters would involve certainly (1) more training and (2) logistical support to help us move troops into areas where they are needed, and also financial support to help us maintain the troops when they are in the area of operation.

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