

INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION DIRECTORATE

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Joint Press Release: Commemorating the International Day of the Disappeared; High Level Dialogue on Missing Migrants.

On 30 August 2023, the African Union Commission (AUC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), with the support of the Embassy of Switzerland in Ethiopia, organized a High-Level Dialogue on Missing Migrants under the theme “Addressing the Issue of Missing Migrants in Africa: from Policy to Action” to commemorate the International Day of the Disappeared.

The opening was attended by the following high-level personalities who delivered compelling statements around the growing human tragedy of disappearances along migratory routes; H.E. Dr. Ergogie Tesfaye, Minister of Women and Social Affairs of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia delivered a keynote address noting that “Migration of human beings is a natural process and an unavoidable phenomenon that should be well managed and facilitated to make it safe and orderly.” Adding that managing migration is a global, regional and national challenge for origin, transit and destination countries, citing Ethiopia as an example; being affected by the issues of disappearance, drowning, and death of its citizens in transit and destination countries bordering its Northern, Eastern and Southern routes. She reiterated Ethiopia’s commitment to implementing the GCM after its signing in December 2018 in Marrakesh as a resolute measure in addressing the issue of missing migrants.

In H.E. Amb. Minata Samate Cessouma, Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development’s speech, delivered by Mr. Sabelo Mbokazi, Head of Labour, Employment and Migration, a clear call was made for States to “confront the stark reality of a diverse range of circumstances that lead to the disappearance of our fellow Africans.” Noting as well that conflict, violence, human rights violations, natural catastrophes, and other complex risks along migratory routes “cast dark shadows upon our continent.” Observing that, “Africa’s history is intertwined with migration as a mechanism of survival and a catalyst for development, thus our focus should be unwavering — on addressing the travails of missing migrants and their anguished families”. The speech underscored two critical actions to be pursued; harnessing the political will of our member states to endorse and embrace Res. 486 and, letting the African Union be the driving force behind a Unified African Approach to building a cohesive strategy to prevent and address cases of missing migrants.

The representative of H.E Amb. Rose Kashembe Sakala - Ambassador of Zambia to Ethiopia and the AU, and the Chairperson of the STC on Migration, Refugees & Internally Displaced Persons emphasized that, “Africa stands at a crossroads, where the choice to act [*on the issue of migrant disappearances*] is not merely an option but an ethical imperative. Our continent bears witness to both the challenges and the potential solutions that are within our reach. We cannot – and will not – stand idle in the face of such human suffering. It is the stories of missing migrants, the pain of their families, and the hope for a better tomorrow that compel us to action... We are tasked not only with a moral obligation but also with a duty to our shared future”. Our key priorities are clear: Policy into Practice; Partnerships for Impact; Empowering

Local Communities; Resource Mobilization and; Advocacy and Awareness,” she added.

Mr. Patrick Youssef, ICRC Regional Director for Africa, pointed to an alarming number of migrants including refugees and asylum seekers going missing in Africa every year while travelling through hostile environments on land or at sea, as they find themselves caught in contexts of armed conflict or detained without access to any means of communication with the outside world when they fall victim to trafficking or hide for fear of arrest or deportation. Migrants, including stateless persons, refugees and asylum seekers, often face very difficult circumstances and go missing at borders or upon return to their countries of origin. Those who die during their journey are often unidentified, their bodies never recovered or buried in unmarked graves in transit or destination countries. He recalled that addressing the growing issue of disappearance transcends national responses and requires transnational/transregional cooperation along migratory routes.

Mr. Oliver Hoehne, Deputy Ambassador of Switzerland to Ethiopia, and the AU, stressed the importance of the event in contributing to better understand the issues of missing migrants and to guide collective action to addressing these issues. He welcomed the Rabat Process, a regional dialogue on migration between African and European countries, which for the first time included the theme on missing persons, adding that the next meeting of the Rabat Process will be held in Geneva from 20 – 21 September under the theme: “family separation and missing persons in the context of migration”. He also highlighted the multiple links between armed conflict and migration, thus, all collective efforts on behalf of migrants won’t be enough if new armed conflicts continue to erupt. The need to explore the opportunities on the growing role of data, AI and networking between different actors is imperative, he said.

The high-level dialogue was constituted by panels, consisting of presentations and Q&A sessions. Hon. Maya Sahil-Fadel, Vice-Chair and Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Migrants and Internally Displaced, gave a detailed account of the purpose, objectives, the spirit and letter of ACHPR/Res. 486, later providing recommendations on policy pursuits at continental, regional and national levels for its implementation. A session on the perspectives on the issue of missing migrants in Africa chaired by the representative of the Zambia Ambassador to the AU followed. Ambassador of The Gambia to the AU, Jainaba Jagne chaired the session on preventing the death and disappearance of migrants in Africa. The final session recalled the recommendations and was moderated by Amb. Jainaba Jagne of The Gambia, Mr. Bruce Mokaya, ICRC representative to the AU and Mr. Sabelo Mbokazi, Head of Division for Labour, Employment and Migration, AUC.

The high level dialogue reaffirmed AU’s commitment to supporting its member states towards increasing the protection of migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers amongst others, through relevant existing and new policies and initiatives. It provided enhanced knowledge and understanding of the specific recommendations of Resolution 486, that protect migrants, missing migrants, and the needs of their families.

The event recognized AU decision makers, member states, RMs and RECs including other key migration actors at the highest level play a central role in promoting policies and practices that reduce risk of migrants’ disappearance, advocate for their

guaranteed rights throughout migratory routes in Africa, and adequately address the needs of families of missing persons.

All stakeholders were called upon to enhance their commitment to the implementation of ACHPR/Res. 486, leading to the establishment of a Common Africa Position on Missing Migrants to be championed by ACHPR and HHS of the AUC. Also, advocated for the need to dedicate a year to missing migrants.

Participants made concrete suggestions to advance these objectives, including developing an independent oversight committee to support African States; creating a network of national focal points on missing migrants; reinforcing search and rescue operations including in desert areas, amongst others.

The high-level dialogue was attended by AU member states, representatives from the Commission, AU organs, foreign embassies accredited to the AU, ICRC, IOM, UNHCR, other relevant UN Agencies and other international partners with interest of advancing the ACHPR/Res. 486 and the Global Compact for Safely, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)

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