# **OPENING ADDRESS AT THE 29TH CONFERENCE OF DIRECTORS GENERAL OF WORLD CUSTOMS ORGANIZATION WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA REGION BY THE VICE CHAIR COL HAMEED IBRAHIM ALI (RTD) CFR IN BANJUL, THE GAMBIA ON 4**

# **MAY 2023**

* The President His Excellency ADAMA BARROW
* The Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs, and other Senior Gambian Government Officials
* The Secretary General, World Customs Organization Dr Kunio Mikuriya
* The President ECOWAS Commission
* The President Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC)
* The Directors General of Customs, West and Central Africa (WCA) Region
* The Commissioner of Economic Development Trade Tourism Industry and Mineral African Union Commission
* The Regional Development Manager WCO-WCA
* The Representatives of:
  + United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
  + Africa Regional Technical Assistance Centers (AFTITAC) West II,
  + Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
  + Anti-corruption and Integrity Programme
* Other Development Partners
* Invited Guests from other Customs Administrations
* The Director ROCB
* The Directors Regional Institutions
* Members of Finance/Audit Committees
* Members of Experts Committee
* Other senior officers of the Gambian Revenue Authority
* Distinguished Invited Guests
* Gentlemen of the Press
* Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am honored and privileged to stand before you today. I join my colleague and brother, the Director General and the staff of Gambia Revenue Authority to welcome you to this auspicious occasion of the 29th conference of Directors-General of the World Customs organization-West and Central Africa Region (WCO-WCA).
2. Exactly one year ago, we gathered in Brazzaville to discuss how best to move our region forward in terms of trade and economic development. We are thankful to God for granting us all journey mercies from our various countries to the beautiful city of Banjul. It is equally heart warming for us all to see the demonstration of a high level of political will enjoyed by our host, the Gambian Revenue Authority, through the auspicious presence of His Excellency, the President of Gambai, Adama Barow.

3. Your Excellency, many of our delegates experienced long hours of flying, connections and transits to arrive here. Nothing is more gratifying than the sight and presence of Your Excellency in this hall to declare our deliberations open. On behalf of all Directors-General of Customs in our Region and indeed all participants in this Conference, I wish to express our profound gratitude to you Mr. President, for making out time out of your tight schedule to grace this occasion. Your Excellency, we are most delighted to have you in our midst. We want to register our sincere appreciation for your continued support to Gambian Revenue Authority. We equally thank the Honourable Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs and Other Senior Government Officials who have joined us at this historical Conference.

1. I also wish to appreciate our amiable Secretary General of the World Customs Organization, Dr Kunio Mikuriya for joining us here in Banjul. The 29th West and Central Africa Directors General Conference is unique because the Secretary General’s tenure would be ending by the next Policy and Council Sessions in December 2023. I want to use his opportunity to appreciate him for his leadership style of inclusion and diversity. In his administration, the African Continent has been fully engaged in WCO programmes in many strategic and frontline Committees. Some of his key development programmes and tools of governance that have created and increased the opportunity for the continent’s participation include the increase in the number of Technical Officers and Professional Associates positions to the region and getting funding for the various regional security initiatives. It is pertinent to mention that one of these programmes is the WCO Global Conference on Fragile Borders that was held in Abuja from 31 January - 2 February 2023. Noting the occurrence of insurgency, banditry, and terrorism in our region, this conference was an enlightening experience for Nigeria and the West and Central Africa Region. We deeply appreciate you.

5. This is the first Directors General’s Conference I will be superintending as the Vice-Chair of the West and Central Africa Region. For the past one year, I have enjoyed an overwhelming support and cooperation from all of you. Thank you very much for upholding the spirit of teamwork and ensuring we move our region forward. Together, we are working towards the deployment of the best resources and tools to direct the regional affairs through a transparent and efficient platform for effective service delivery.

6. As usual the theme of the Conference is the same as the years’ WCO International Customs Day (ICD) theme: ‘Nurturing **the Next Generation by Promoting a Culture of Knowledge Sharing and Professional Pride in Customs’.** This emphasizes on the transfer of both knowledge and professional ethics of Customs from the old and exiting generation to the new and incoming generation. I want to commend the Secretary General for this well thought out theme. It is timely and commendable.

7. As we are all aware, the region is faced with challenges such as insurgency and insecurity, economic crisis, incomplete digitalization of customs processes. Others include poor infrastructure, non-compliance to Customs regulations and procedures by traders and inadequate capacity-building infrastructure among others that affect our role as Customs officers. Therefore, this is the time to demonstrate our capacity to nurture multilateral initiatives that are beneficial to our collective objective of building a formidable and integrated platform for Customs in the region.

8. This would be better sustained through our newly adopted scale of regional contribution, based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Responses are quite encouraging as some countries have sent in their evidences of transfer transactions. The Regional Entities, Regional Office on Capacity Building (ROCB), Regional Intelligence Liaison Office (RILO), Regional Training Centres (RTCs) and all of us have a role to play in achieving our objective. Officers, especially the newly recruited, should be encouraged to take advantage of the WCO e-Learning platform such as CLiCK! to help develop and equip themselves. The platform is free of charge for Customs officers of WCO member administrations.

9. Regional Intelligence Liaison Office (RILO) should expand its frontiers in intelligence gathering and sharing by improving on its capabilities. The Regional Training Centres (RTCs) should develop systematic schemes for trainings that would enhance the building of the capacity of the new generation of officers. With the assistance of international donor bodies, we can realize these goals. The efforts of Customs administrations in building capacity and ensuring participation in the WCO assisted training projects are paramount. It is our collective responsibility at this Conference to evolve concrete mechanisms for the realization of knowledge goals and professional culture for the next generation of Customs in the region.

10. We appreciate the support of our development partners in our efforts to build Modern Customs Administrations. We acknowledge the strides we have recorded, working with your in various countries. We would however continue to seek your engagement in a number of other areas. This include:

a. Evolving systematic knowledge sharing strategies and creation of platforms for same.

1. Effective and efficient strategies for utilization of the existing

Regional Training Centres.

c. Shared understanding of the operational problems posed by our fragile borders and collaboration with WCO in ongoing engagements to address the emerging challenge.

d. The development of integrity programmes aimed at inculcating professionalism and transparency in the new generation of officers.

11. We would take advantage of this conference to deliberate on the region’s untapped potentials to improve on areas of governance such as performance and impact measurement. We hope that this would enhance effective and efficient utilization of our regional entities in collaboration with our stakeholders at the various levels of our operations to achieve the sustainability of our objectives.

12. I heartily welcome our development partners here present and implore them to come up with initiatives that would assist the region to develop transparent and efficient strategies for a better service delivery on the burning concerns.

13. Once again, I thank you all for coming. Almighty Allah bless you.