

**STATEMENT DELIVERED BY PAUL OSEI-KUFFOUR, WADEMOS NETWORK COORDINATOR, AT THE 81<sup>ST</sup> AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS IN BANJUL, THE GAMBIA – OCTOBER 18, 2024**

**Banjul, The Gambia**

***Honourable Chairperson and Commissioners of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights,***

***Honourable State Party Delegates,***

***Distinguished Colleagues from Civil Society,***

***All protocols observed.***

The Women Leaders Network for Development (RFLD) and the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS) congratulate the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights on the holding of the 81<sup>st</sup> Ordinary Session and the privilege to present this statement.

As a woman-led organization, RFLD has over the years been working to end discrimination and violence against women and girls and promote gender equality and human rights across the Sahel, West, Central, and Southern Africa. For two years running, RFLD has been a proud member of WADEMOS, a network of 45 national and regional-level pro-democracy civil society organizations leveraging their solidarity and mutual support to roll back the tide of democratic backsliding observed across the ECOWAS subregion in recent years.

Over several years of activism and advocacy, WADEMOS commends the commitment and the dedication of the African Commission to safeguarding and upholding human rights across the African continent. We have taken cognisance of the gross violations of human rights and incessant abuse of power, against which the Commission, in its strife for democracy and human rights, has continually intervened along with a myriad of civic actors and human rights defenders.

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However, WADEMOS and RFLD are deeply concerned about the rigorous wave of human rights violations which have transpired with impunity over the past year across the ECOWAS subregion, characterized by violent crackdowns on protesters by government security forces, illegal arrests and detention of government critics and a clampdown on media and media practitioners. These have become prevalent as the world's worst humanitarian crisis currently quietly unfolds in the Sahel, where a raging terrorist insurgency and the adverse effects of climate change have triggered growing insecurity and widespread human rights violations, including gender-based violence and violence against children. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees, the crisis has an estimated 3.7 million people internally displaced, with another half a million refugees and asylum seekers seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

Military government continue to curtail free speech, break protests with violence and conduct illegal arrests and detention, even as citizens agitate for a speedy transition back to democracy. While the risks of terrorist insurgency have infiltrated in the coast and spilled over to countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, the military governments in West Africa have grown increasingly intolerant of criticism, particularly criticism targeting their inability to rein in the terrorist insurgency and the increasing killing of innocent civilians by the military in antiterrorism operations. In Burkinafaso, terrorist insurgency is now being weaponized to clamp down on civil freedoms and free speech, as government critics and dissidents are sent to the war front for utterances the government deems unfavorable.

RFLD and WADEMOS are equally concerned by the varying degrees of restrictions on civil society, political activities and political parties in the Sahel and West Africa as military and authoritarian regimes alike move to consolidate their power. We find it equally worrying how the threat to regional integration with the pending withdrawal of the three Sahelian states from ECOWAS has undermined the capacity of ECOWAS to intervene in the human rights violations in the Sahelian states and West Africa.

As we try to navigate these challenges as civil society, we have disturbingly observed how governments, in efforts to appease the masses for their failure to deliver on the

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promise of democracy, are increasingly leaning into ethnocentric and divisive religious sentiments which threaten human rights across the subregion. This has been evident in the recent efforts to repeal the ban on female genital mutilation in the Gambia and the growing victimization of Fulani in Burkina Faso with the intensification of the terrorist insurgency.

In conclusion, we call on the African Commission to take decisive action:

- a. Conduct country finding missions in relation to human rights abuses in the region, particularly in conflict zones and areas where civil liberties are suppressed.
- b. Call on member states to respect human rights, uphold democratic principles, and release political prisoners.

We remain hopeful that, with the Commission's leadership and the collective efforts of civil society, we can turn the tide against authoritarianism, protect human rights, and build a brighter future for all in the ECOWAS region. WADEMOS and RFLD will continue to work with all partners and members of the Network to enhance the rights and freedoms of HRDs and activists in West Africa.

Thank you very much, Chair!

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