



KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HER EXCELLENCY, BIANCA ODUMEGWU-OJUKWU, THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AT THE STRATEGIC RETREAT FOR AMBASSADORS AND HIGH COMMISSIONERS DESIGNATED TO WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES HELD AT CEEDAPEG HOTELS, UYO, AKWA IBOM STATE, ON SATURDAY 13TH JUNE, 2026

It is a profound privilege for me to address Your Excellencies today at this crucial strategic retreat.

2. Allow me to express my sincere gratitude to the His Excellency, Pastor Umoh Basse Eno, the Executive Governor of Akwa-Ibom for permitting the hosting of this premium retreat in the beautiful city of Uyo and for the warm hospitality accorded to me and the entire participants.

3. I would also like to take this opportunity to, once again, congratulate Your Excellencies Ambassadors and High Commissioners-designate on your appointment as principal representatives of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, GCFR to countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

4. Following the induction programme held in April 2026 at the Rotunda of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Headquarters in Abuja for the generality of Ambassadors and High Commissioners-designate, it has become necessary to organize this strategic retreat for this select group of envoys. You are taking up your posts at a defining and turbulent period for the West African Sub-region and Mr. President has clear expectations for your service which is that our foreign policy must deliver peace, security, and economic prosperity for the region.

5. It is imperative to reaffirm the foundational framework of our Foreign Policy concentric circle, prioritizing national interest in ever expanding geographical tiers, within this strategy West Africa forms the critical, nonnegotiable second circle positioning Nigeria as the primary regional hegemon and anchor for sub-regional integration and security. Nigeria's commitment to West Africa is absolute and unwavering. The sub-region is the primary ring of our foreign policy engagements. Your postings are not routine diplomatic assignments. They are strategic deployments to the frontline of our national interest. You are the faces of Nigeria's renewed leadership in the sub-region.

6. The challenges facing our neighbourhood are multifaceted and urgent. We are witnessing severe threats to democratic governance across West Africa. Unconstitutional changes of government have strained our regional cohesion. The bond of brotherhood that characterized ECOWAS must be restored and the exception to unconstitutional change of government must be upheld. Democracy remains the best form of government for the peace and prosperity of our peoples.

7. Terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational crimes threaten to destabilize our regions, our lives and livelihood. The multidimensional security challenges confronting West Africa continue to generate undesired consequences which portends a reversal of the economic development achieved in the region through integration over the years. The wave of terrorism across the Sahel which have a direct impact of Nigeria have to be contained for the region to regain its pride of place.

8. Indeed, the economic potential of our region remains immense and holds a lot of promise. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA) offers unprecedented trade opportunities. ECOWAS protocols on free movement provide the framework for true integration. Your mission, therefore, is to bridge the gap between these challenges and opportunities.

9. It is important I allude to the fact the topics of discourse are carefully selected as well as presenters. This without iota of doubt will sharpen your perception viz a viz Nigeria's interest in West African Countries. The Topics include amongst other includes;

- i. Overview of ECOWAS and Nigeria's leadership role within the Community;
- ii. Regional security dynamics and unconstitutional changes of government;
- iii. Regional economic programmes, including trade liberalisation and free movement of goods and services and;
- iv. The role and expectations of Nigeria Ambassadors/High Commissioners in West Africa.
- v. Migration and Humanitarian Challenges in West Africa; and
- vi. Analysis on External Influence and Geopolitical Contestation in West Africa.

I therefore encourage you to pay active attention and interact constructively during the session.

Your Excellencies, distinguished participants,

10. As mentioned earlier, the President has very high expectations of you.

11. Your first priority is the steadfast promotion of democratic stability. Nigeria stands firmly against any unconstitutional takeover of power. You must engage your host governments to strengthen democratic institutions. Champion the rule of law, human rights, and good governance.

12. Secondly, you must aggressively pursue economic diplomacy. Regional integration is meaningless without robust intra-African trade. You must actively dismantle non-tariff barriers facing Nigerian businesses. Promote partnerships in agriculture, manufacturing, energy, and digital technology. Bring West African investments home, and take Nigerian innovation to the region.

13. In addition, you must prioritize security cooperation. No nation can defeat the current security threats alone. Work closely with host authorities to enhance intelligence sharing. Strengthen cross-border security

mechanisms to combat smuggling and trafficking. A secure West Africa is a prerequisite for a secure Nigeria.

14. Furthermore, you must be deliberate about citizen diplomacy in your host country. Millions of Nigerians live and work across ECOWAS member countries. The protection of their rights and welfare is non-negotiable. Your embassies must become safe havens and efficient service centres. Engage the Nigerian diaspora as partners in development, not just as subjects of consular care.

15. May I also remind that, diplomacy in the modern era requires agility and innovation. You can no longer rely on traditional, slow-moving bureaucratic processes. Leverage digital tools to enhance your communication and outreach. Be proactive, visible, and build strong networks for the furtherance of our national interest. You are required to maximize your impact through strategic focus and efficient resource allocation.

16. In conclusion, it is pertinent to state that the task ahead of you is demanding but highly rewarding. You bear the weight of our nation's historic regional responsibility. Nigeria's greatness must be reflected in the quality of your representation.

17. I wish you all a highly successful and productive retreat. Thank you for your attention.

18. May God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.