

Ceremony for the Opening of the 2026 Judicial Year of
the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights

“20 Years of Service in Protecting Human and Peoples' Rights in Africa”

2 March 2026 · Arusha, Tanzania

UNHCR Statement

1. His Excellency John Dramani Mahama,
President of the Republic of Ghana and Guest
of Honour together with your delegation,
2. *Honorable Juge Blaise Tchikaya, President de la Cour Africaine
des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples,*
3. *S.E l'Ambassadeur Selma Malika Haddadi, Vice-Présidente de
Commission de l'Union Africaine, présente en mode virtuel,*
4. Hon. Zainab Athuman Katimba, Deputy Minister
of Constitutional and Legal Affairs representing
Hon. Dr. Juma Zuberi Homera, Minister of
Constitutional and Legal Affairs of the United
Republic of Tanzania,
5. S.E. Willy Nyamitwe, Ambassadeur Extraordinaire et
Plénipotentiaire de la République du Burundi auprès de la
République Fédérale Démocratique d'Éthiopie, Représentant

Permanent auprès de l'Union Africaine et Président du Comité des
Représentants Permanents,

6. Excellencies Members of the Permanent
Representatives Committee to the African
Union,

7. *Distinguished Judges of the African Court on Human
and Peoples' Rights,*

Excellencies,

Colleagues, Partners, Ladies and Gentlemen,

All protocols duly observed.

It is indeed an honour and a privilege to address this distinguished gathering on behalf of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UNHCR.

We meet at a moment of particular significance, as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights marks its twentieth anniversary—two decades dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights and freedoms enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Over these years, the Court has helped strengthen

the foundations of justice, dignity, and the rule of law across our continent.

This anniversary offers an important opportunity to reflect on the Court's achievements. Through landmark judgments and advisory opinions, the Court has progressively clarified and reinforced African human rights standards. Today, we honour the dedication of its Judges, Registry, and legal professionals whose tireless work transforms legal principles into lived protection, and advances the vision of a continent where justice is guaranteed for all.

We also acknowledge the commitment of States Parties, whose cooperation—particularly through implementation of the Court's decisions—remains essential to its effectiveness and authority.

For UNHCR, whose mandate focuses on protecting refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and internally displaced persons, the Court's contribution over the past twenty years has been of profound importance. Its jurisprudence has strengthened the legal architecture protecting vulnerable individuals and reinforced a fundamental principle: human rights do not diminish at borders and must never depend on legal status.

Central to this protection is effective access to justice. Forcibly displaced persons and stateless individuals must have equal and meaningful access to judicial and administrative remedies. Yet many of them continue to face serious barriers, including lack of documentation, limited legal aid, unfamiliar procedures, language obstacles, and at times discriminatory practices. Addressing these constraints is essential. The Court must remain reachable, its procedures navigable, and its judgments enforceable.

Across Africa, conflict, persecution, and climate-related shocks continue to drive displacement on a massive scale. As of mid-2025, Eastern and Southern Africa hosted more than 24.9 million forcibly displaced persons, including 6.3 million refugees and asylum-seekers, while West and Central Africa hosted approximately 20.2 million forcibly displaced and stateless persons. These figures reflect the growing complexity of displacement across the continent and the increasing pressure on host communities and national systems.

As these dynamics evolve, the role of the Court will become ever more critical. UNHCR's experience consistently shows that when access to justice is weak or denied, protection gaps widen, and risks of exploitation and exclusion deepen. Conversely, accessible and

responsive justice systems are powerful tools for restoring rights, strengthening resilience, and fostering social cohesion.

Effective justice requires strong and independent national courts, adequately resourced legal aid systems, active civil society engagement, and enhanced cooperation among continental mechanisms. Above all, it requires the full and faithful implementation of this Court's decisions, so that its important work translates into tangible change in the lives of women, men, and children across Africa.

UNHCR has a long history of judicial engagement and supporting both regional and national judiciaries. UNHCR has an MoU with the ECOWAS Court of Justice and with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. UNHCR acts as an *Amicus Curiae* or 'friend of the court' around the world, as part of its supervisory mandate. The Office also provides training and expert opinions on specific legal issues regarding the interpretation of the 1951 Refugees Convention and the 1969 OAU Refugees Convention.

I am especially proud of UNHCR and the ACtHPR joint initiative to work together on a Memorandum of Understanding that we hope to finalize in the coming months. This will enable us to deepen our partnership and

strengthen the work of our two institutions towards our shared objectives.

We would also encourage all African Union Member States that have not yet done so to accept the Court's jurisdiction under Article 34 of the Protocol.

Mr President, Excellencies, Your Honours, distinguished guests,

This anniversary is a reaffirmation of our shared commitment to the values of the African Charter and to the principle that every person—regardless of status or nationality—deserves equal protection under the law.

I thank you.