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**SPEECH**

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**FIRST LADY OF CÔTE D’IVOIRE**

**3rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRES**

**« HIDDEN HUNGER »**

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**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Distinguished guests,**

It is my pleasure to be with you today at the **Stuttgart Conference Centre**, in this region where I resided for several years and of which I have kept a wonderful memory.

First of all, I would like to offer my greetings to **Mr Thomas SILBERHORN, Secretary of State of the Federal Ministry for International Economic Cooperation and Development**, as well as to every leading figure present here today.

I would like to greet and express my gratitude to **Professor Hans BIESALSKI, Chairman of the Congress, and Managing Director of the German Food Security Agency** for his invitation; I wish to thank the **German Confectionery Industry (BDSI) and the German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa (GISCO)**, co-organizers of the 3rd edition of the “Hidden Hunger” Congress.

Finally, I offer my greetings to **the representatives of the United Nations System Organizations, and to every foundation and non-governmental organization** partnering this event.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

This third International Congress on Chronic Hunger focuses on the **“Strategies to improve nutrition quality and combat hidden hunger”**; this important topic calls for the dedication and mobilization of all, and of the agro-food industry stakeholders in particular, to find a sustainable answer to this problem.

In this regard, I would like to congratulate the organizers of the congress whose results will undoubtedly give rise to innovative ways of fighting world hunger.

Indeed, **we call on our humanity** whenever we meet to share our expertise and reflect upon ways of improving the living conditions of the most underprivileged among us. Henceforth, it is our duty to concretely assist and support our fellow citizens.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

When you invited me to this High-level Meeting, **you asked me to present my actions and personal commitment in support of the women and children of Africa.**

In this respect, I would like to specify that my actions center on four major topics, namely: **the Children of Africa Foundation, the Aid for the Women of Côte d’Ivoire, the Fight Against Child Labor and Exploitation,** and lastly **my role as UNAIDS Special Ambassador.**

First of all, with the **Children of Africa Foundation** – which I founded in 1998 – we undertake charitable actions mostly throughout **Côte d’Ivoire but also in ten other African countries.**

To conduct its activities, the **Children of Africa Foundation** benefits from the generosity of private donors as well as national and international partners. With their support, we strive to improve the everyday lives of thousands of vulnerable children. Our humanitarian actions are essentially focused on **health, education, and social development**.

For instance, in the **health sector** the Foundation regularly organizes **immunization campaigns against epidemics, and regular ophthalmic campaigns for thousands of children**. In addition, the Foundation **has equipped many hospitals and health centers** nationwide.

Furthermore, the Children of Africa Foundation has initiated the construction of a **Hospital in Bingerville, a district of Abidjan** entirely dedicated to mother-and-child health care. A major Children of Africa Foundation project, the hospital is scheduled to open its doors to the public at the end of this year.

In the **educational** field, in addition to building a mixed high school in northern Côte d’Ivoire, the Foundation has chartered **eight library buses** across the country to support the education and alphabetization of **200,000 children** by giving free access to reading.

Every year, we distribute thousands of **school kits to schoolchildren, and books to schools**. We have also equipped high schools and universities with **multimedia rooms fully equipped with computers, printers, and internet connections**, with the aim to familiarize our youth with computers and IT tools.

As regards the **social sector**, the Children of Africa Foundation has built a shelter in Abidjan named ‘**Children’s Home’**, **which fully cares for** **about a hundred underprivileged children**.

In addition, **we subsidize shelters across Africa** to receive and mentor street youth, orphans, and other vulnerable children.

**In short, since its creation nearly 20 years ago, the Children of Africa Foundation** has put a smile on the faces of thousands of disadvantaged children in Africa, and given them hope for a brighter future.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Over time I have come to realize that, in order to help children, one must improve the living conditions of their mothers too. **Empowering women has thus become one of my major concerns,** leadingme to initiate the **Financial Fund for Women of Côte d’Ivoire in 2012, with the support of the President of the Republic**.

**This low-interest rate microcredit fund enables women who are otherwise non-eligible for conventional bank loans** to create or develop an income-generating activity. The beneficiaries also learn how to manage their investments, and attend literacy and family planning classes.

**After five years of operation, now endowed with a capital of 13 million euros, this fund** has helped **115,000 women** so far to become independent and end the cycle of precariousness for their families.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I would now like to talk about **my fight against child labor and exploitation, particularly in cocoa plantations**, as I know many of you are interested in this issue, including the representatives of the German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa.

As you may know, Côte d’Ivoire is the world’s leading cocoa producer. Unfortunately, our country is also confronted with the **thorny issue of child labor in cocoa farms**. This is a matter of concern for the Côte d’Ivoire Government. Hence, since his accession to power in 2011, the President of the Republic has created two committees to fight against this scourge and to coordinate all similar actions.

One is the **Inter-Ministerial Committee**, chaired by the Minister in charge of Labor and represented by the vice-president, **Mrs Mariétou KONE, Minister in charge of Child Protection, who is here with us today; the other is the National Oversight Committee** which I have agreed to chair as per my commitment to the wellbeing of children.

Within this framework, we are working with numerous partners such as the **International Labor Organization, Unicef, the World Cocoa Foundation, the International Cocoa Initiative, Save the Children**, not to mention numerous other **local and international partners**.

We have devised two **Action Plans** in collaboration with our partners. The first Action Plan was implemented between 2012 and 2014, and the second one spans from 2015 to 2017. These National Action Plans aim to eradicate this phenomenon and **improve the living conditions of cocoa-producing communities**.

**Actions have been taken in the following areas:**

* **As regards prevention, we have worked to reinforce the legal framework for a more effective protection of children**. Today, Côte d’Ivoire has adopted legal texts towards the imprisonment of any person involved in child trafficking and exploitation. There was no such legal provision prior to these texts. Their enforcement enabled police operations to be carried out in partnership with **Interpol and the International Organization for Migration**, leading to the arrest of **more than one hundred traffickers** – **some of whom were sentenced to imprisonment**.
* We are also working to **strengthen sub-regional cooperation** in order to **fight against cross-border child trafficking more efficiently**. To this end, **we have signed cooperation agreements with neighboring countries, notably Mali in 2011, Burkina Faso in 2013, and Ghana in 2016**. Similarly, we are also planning to hold the **West African First Ladies Conference on Child Labor** in Abidjan in October 2017, with a view to reflecting upon this issue together.
* We also organize **extensive media and awareness campaigns** on a regular basis, in order to raise collective awareness and to further the involvement of populations in the national effort against child trafficking and child labor. **Thousands of cocoa producers** have already been sensitized to, and trained to fight against, child labor in their plantations.

At this point, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa for its PRO-PLANTEUR program, which has improved the living conditions of more than **20,000 families of cocoa producers in Côte d’Ivoire**.

* **As regards the protection and assistance of exploited children, several thousands of them** are now in the care of State structures and NGO partners. **A toll-free green line for children in distress** has been created; it has enabled us to regularly **rescue abused children**.
* With the same objective in mind, the Children of Africa Foundation is building **three shelters for children in distress in the cities of Soubré in the west, Bouaké in the center, and Ferkéssédougou in the north of Côte d’Ivoire**, to provide urgent and adequate assistance to children victims of trafficking and exploitation.

To implement these Action Plans, the Ivorian Government and its partners have invested more than **24 million euros in the fight against this scourge over the 2012 – 2017 period**.

Thanks to the achieved results, Côte d’Ivoire has been recognized and ranked by the US State Department among the countries making significant efforts to eliminate child labor.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Finally, I would like to say a few words about my commitment as **UNAIDS Special Ambassador for the Elimination of Mother-to-Child HIV Transmission and the Promotion of Pediatric Treatment**.

I have taken on this noble task to further prevent this terrible disease, as well as to promote pediatric treatment in Africa. Indeed, the Mother-to-Child HIV transmission rate is still too high on our continent; as such, it calls for intensive awareness campaigns and actions among populations.

Moreover, treating pediatric AIDS remains a major challenge for our countries, since most of our children do not yet benefit from specific treatment in accordance with their age.

We hope that our commitment to this cause will give rise to partnerships with other NGOs and pharmaceutical companies working in this field, in order to preserve the lives of thousands of children through adequate and accessible care in Africa.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Distinguished guests,**

I have undertaken these actions, among others, in Côte d’Ivoire and across the African continent to foster child protection and the empowerment of women. All this has been possible thanks to **the support of our partners, in particular the United Nations System Organizations in charge of child protection, and the national and international NGOs present in Côte d’Ivoire**.

I take this opportunity to express my warmest thanks and my deep gratitude to them.

I sincerely hope that other organizations will join us in this noble fight, for I believe that together we can **find sustainable solutions to improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable populations**.

I hope the sessions will lead to fruitful discussions, and I declare open **the 3rd International “Hidden Hunger” Congress**.

Thank you for your attention