



REPUBLIC OF KENYA

**SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY HON. WILLIAM SAMOEI
RUTO, PhD, C.G.H., PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
KENYA AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE
FORCES, DURING THE 14TH INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF REFUGEE AND MIGRATION JUDGES
WORLD CONFERENCE**

NOVEMBER 17, 2025

NAIROBI

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. On behalf of the people of Kenya, I extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to Your Excellencies, honourable judges, and distinguished delegates. Welcome to Nairobi, a city that reflects the resilience, diversity, and generosity of our nation. I thank the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges, under the leadership of Honourable Justice Isaac Lenaola, for choosing Nairobi to host this 14th World Conference.
2. We gather at a defining moment in human history. The world faces a displacement crisis of unprecedented scale. More than 120 million people have been forced from their homes by conflict, persecution, economic hardship and environmental disasters. These numbers are not mere statistics; they are a reminder of the urgency and significance of this year's theme: "Protecting the Integrity of Refugee and Migration Systems."
3. This conference calls us to reaffirm our shared responsibility to defend justice, uphold human dignity, and extend compassion. Refugees and migrants are entitled to the rights enjoyed by all people. They are individuals whose lives have been disrupted by circumstances beyond their control, yet they carry resilience, hope, and a strong desire to rebuild.
4. Kenya's tradition of hosting refugees is longstanding and distinguished. For more than three decades, our nation has opened its doors to those fleeing war, persecution, and famine. Today, nearly 580,000 refugees and asylum seekers call Kenya home, one of the world's largest refugee populations.



This reflects not only our generosity but our unwavering belief in the principles of humanity and solidarity.

5. Our approach has consistently been anchored in international law. Kenya is party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention. In 2021, we enacted the Refugees Act, guaranteeing refugees the right to work, to move freely, to access services, and protecting them from refoulement. This progressive legal framework reflects our belief that refugees should not live indefinitely in camps, but as active participants in their host societies.
6. Earlier this year, we launched the Shirika Plan, “shirika” meaning cooperation in Swahili. This visionary programme seeks to transform refugee camps into integrated settlements where refugees and host communities can live, work, and prosper together. It is a bold shift from encampment to empowerment.
7. The Shirika Plan aligns with the Global Compact on Refugees and embodies the African Union’s commitment to African solutions for African challenges. It promotes self-reliance for refugees and development for host communities, a genuine model of shared progress and sustainable solidarity.
8. Kenya continues to lead in regional diplomacy, recognising that peace remains the most durable solution for displaced populations. Our efforts in South Sudan, Somalia, the Horn of Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo reflect our belief that regional peace is essential for regional stability.



9. Through frameworks such as the 2017 Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees, Kenya has advocated for shared responsibility and collective action, including voluntary repatriation where conditions permit, local integration where feasible, and resettlement for those requiring special protection. Refugee protection is a global obligation, and no single nation can shoulder it alone.
10. If Kenya's open-door policy reflects our heart, then the rule of law is the backbone that sustains it. The judiciary plays a decisive role because often, a single ruling determines whether a refugee is granted safety or returned to danger. This responsibility requires impartiality, diligence, and humanity.
11. Judges must ensure that claims are heard fairly and that states uphold their obligations under both domestic and international law. They also play a vital role in harmonising the interpretation of refugee law across jurisdictions.
12. Through cooperation and knowledge-sharing, judges can develop a consistent global jurisprudence that ensures fairness no matter where a claim is heard. Justice must not depend on geography or chance.
13. Judicial independence is the bedrock of this system. Where courts are free from political interference, they serve as safeguards against arbitrary action. They ensure that asylum procedures are credible, transparent, and just; and that justice is not only done, but seen to be done. This, in turn, fosters public confidence



14. Additionally, integrity in refugee and migration systems requires strong institutions and credible procedures. Every asylum seeker deserves timely and fair adjudication, access to legal counsel, and the right to appeal. These are the foundations of justice.
15. Fair procedures build public trust. They ensure that genuine refugees receive protection, while those without valid claims are treated with dignity and returned lawfully. Without fairness, systems lose legitimacy and public confidence.
16. Credibility also demands adequate resources and skilled personnel. Overburdened systems become vulnerable to abuse. Kenya is therefore strengthening the Department of Refugee Services and enhancing documentation, data-sharing, and cross-border cooperation to support efficient and consistent decision-making.
17. But as you are aware, evidence and credibility remain major challenges in refugee adjudication. Claims often lack documentation, and applicants may be traumatised or fearful, making it difficult for them to express themselves clearly or present their cases effectively. This is why training judges in trauma-informed interviewing and ensuring access to reliable country-of-origin information are essential. Judicial officers must be equipped to assess credibility fairly and consistently.
18. Transparency and accountability are also essential. Governments must publish data, allow independent oversight, and communicate openly with citizens to strengthen public trust and counter misinformation and xenophobia.



19. Distinguished delegates, the global displacement landscape is rapidly evolving. Climate change is now one of the most significant drivers of human mobility, with droughts, floods, and desertification uprooting millions across Africa and beyond. Those displaced by climate shocks may fall outside traditional legal definitions, yet they remain deeply vulnerable.
20. By 2050, climate change may displace more than 200 million people. Kenya has already seen families crossing borders due not only to conflict but to hunger and environmental collapse. Our legal frameworks must therefore evolve to provide protection in such cases, whether through broader interpretations of existing law or complementary protection measures, even as we invest in climate resilience to address displacement at its source.
21. Another challenge is the misuse of asylum systems. Some attempt to use asylum as a backdoor to migration, while some States manipulate refugee labels for political expediency. Both undermine integrity. Our response must be balanced by establishing rigorous verification systems to prevent abuse without undermining fairness for genuine applicants. Strengthening documentation, cross-border information-sharing, and effective screening procedures is essential. Above all, we must not allow the actions of a few to erode protection for the many.
22. Human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants are transnational crimes that prey on the vulnerability of refugees and undermine State authority over migration. Smugglers and traffickers exploit refugees, often subjecting them to abuse, forced labour, and other forms of exploitation. Kenya has aligned its laws with international standards, strengthened penalties, and enhanced cooperation with regional partners.



23. Yet enforcement must go hand in hand with compassion. Victims of trafficking must not be treated as criminals. Our systems must recognise that trafficked persons may have valid protection claims and ensure that they receive justice and dignity.
24. The digital age brings both promise and peril. Artificial intelligence can help streamline asylum processes, reduce backlogs, and improve access to justice. It can assist judges by rapidly analysing precedents or help asylum seekers understand procedures by translating documents into languages they understand.
25. Yet AI also carries risks, including algorithmic bias and a lack of transparency. Over-reliance on automated systems could undermine fairness. Technology must therefore remain a servant of justice, not its master. Any use of AI must be transparent, accountable, and subject to human oversight. Refugee protection is, after all, at its core, about human dignity, something no machine can replicate.
26. Excellencies, honourable judges, the integrity of refugee and migration systems has profound implications for the legitimacy of our laws and the protocols designed to protect vulnerable groups such as refugees and migrants. Integrity ensures that the system protects those in genuine need, resists manipulation, and commands the trust of both refugees and citizens. Without it, we risk the breakdown of asylum systems and the erosion of our shared humanity.



27. Kenya is proud of its contribution in hosting refugees and in developing a strong legal framework in this field. But we recognise our limits and call on the international community to share responsibility more equitably, through financial support, resettlement opportunities, and technical cooperation. Host communities should not bear the burden alone. Solidarity is not charity; it is justice.
28. As you deliberate on these issues over the next few days, I urge you to continue upholding fairness, courage, and independence in your decisions. Your obligation as judges is the solemn duty of ensuring that every refugee and migrant who comes before you finds justice, fairness, and the reassurance that their case has been heard with dignity and integrity. Always remember that the decisions you make reverberate far beyond the courtroom; they shape lives, preserve families, and safeguard the credibility of the international protection regime.
29. Ladies and gentlemen, I now declare the 14th World Conference of the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges officially open.

I thank you.

###

