

## Afreximbank backs direct Africa-Caribbean flights

### ■ NIGERIA

THE acting head of the Africa Export- Import Bank (Afreximbank) in the Caribbean, Okechukwu Ihejirika, says he remains confident scheduled flights between Africa and the Caribbean region could soon become a reality. Afreximbank is encouraging Caribbean businesses to showcase their goods and services at the Fourth Intra- African Trade Fair (IATF2025) in Algiers in September; and Ihejirika, who is head of Afreximbank's Barbados-based Caribbean office, said the financial institution is exploring the possibility of a direct flight between the Caribbean and Algiers for IATF2025.

He, however, said many Africans require a visa to travel through the United States or the United Kingdom, adding that it is easier for a Caribbean national to access such a visa.

'So that means it's easy for them actually to come,' Ihejirika told journalists during Afreximbank's 32nd annual meetings (AAM2025), taking place in Nigeria through tomorrow.

IATF2025 is pitched as a unique and valuable platform for businesses to access an integrated African market of over 1.4 billion people with a gross domestic product (GDP) of over US\$3.5 trillion created under the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Ihejirika said Afreximbank would organise a direct flight between the Caribbean and Algiers once there is demand, noting also that a conversation about trade is also about goods and the movement of people, which includes flights.

'It's a very interesting topic. And what we see of late is more airlines now trying to talk about that possibility and coming to us as well to tell us they are interested,' Ihejirika told reporters, adding that such conversations were not taking place four or five years ago.

'So, those conversations are on the table, and usually when problems are discussed on the table, the next thing that follows is the solution,' Ihejirika said.

'So, I'm very optimistic that one of them, in no distant time, should have a scheduled, regular flight between Africa and the Caribbean as a first step. Because with the movement of people via that flight will also come movement of goods.'

He was confident that when this is proven as a viable concept, people would approach Afreximbank for financing.

'...Then we also see people who will come to us as well with interest on the maritime side, which, of course, we'd be happy to support to see goods move freely, directly, through that short hub across the Atlantic to get goods across the Caribbean without having to transit anywhere else,' Ihejirika said. **-CMC**