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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Statement

by

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Excellencies

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Organization of African Unity, I feel particularly honoured to have this opportunity to address this session of the African Union Executive Council. I thank the leadership of the African Union for maintaining this tradition which symbolizes the close relationship that ECA has had with the OAU/AU since inception in 1963.

Honourable Ministers,

The theme of the celebrations – Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance – is very apt. It acknowledges the key role that the pan-African ideal played in promoting continental unity. The establishment of the OAU was the political manifestation of this noble objective. Yet when we talk about pan-Africanism, we have to recognize the key role of the African Diaspora in promoting this ideal. Leaders and intellectuals such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois and George Padmore are perhaps the most well-known of the cadres in the Diaspora. They promoted pan-Africanism as a rallying point for asserting their racial identity and cultural heritage. This sent out a powerful message to the African continent. For this historical reason it is perhaps not surprising that there is not a similar discourse in Asia, Latin America and indeed the Arab world.

Pan-Africanism at inception was more than a search for racial identity. It was also a rejection of the laughable fallacy that Africans did not have a history. It was therefore partly a reaction, indeed, a refutation of a mindset that defined Africa and Africans from the perspective of the historical experience of slavery, colonialism and racial discrimination. It was at the same time more than a protest. Rather it was the affirmation of the rich cultural heritage of African societies and the importance of achieving freedom and continental unity.

Against this background and given the increasing number of African countries that had attained independence by the early 1960s, the concept of pan-Africanism continued to evolve. It meant overcoming domination and oppression by ending colonialism and apartheid in the continent. It asserted at the same time the possibility of rapid socio-economic transformation of the continent.

Given these common and pressing concerns, it was only quite logical that our forefathers and foremothers came together despite divergences in their ideological dispositions to form the Organization of African Unity. The spirit was captured by President Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria who said at the first OAU Summit in May 1963 that "African unity must take the form of effective solidarity with those who are still fighting for their liberty". The OAU thus became by its very creation the expression of the pan-African ideal and despite the sometimes dismissive tone of its detractors, it must be judged by the results it set out to achieve.

By the time that the African Union was established just over ten years ago, Africa had been rid of colonialism and apartheid. It had organized itself as the African Group within the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement to participate in global processes. Although there is no counterfactual against which to make an assessment, I would also posit that by placing emphasis on respect for colonially inherited boundaries and instead promoting the ideal of regional integration, the OAU played a key role in reducing the potential for inter-state conflict in Africa.

A salutary example of the success of the OAU was the establishment of the Liberation Committee through which Africa provided arms, training and military bases to various liberation movements on the continent. There were many countries and people associated with the stellar work of the Liberation Committee but we must pay particular tribute to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere who pushed for its creation and to Tanzania which provided it a home. Similarly, our gratitude must go to the other Frontline States who provided bases for the liberation movements and bore the brunt of aggression from the colonialists and racial bullies. All African states played their part in the successful liberation of the continent.

Having achieved the prime purpose of the OAU which was the total emancipation of the continent from colonialism and racial discrimination, it was only natural that African leaders would reflect on the future trajectory of the continent. Africa was therefore clearly taking to the admonition of President Kwame Nkrumah who famously said "Seek first the political kingdom and all things shall be added unto you". The outcome of such reflections led to the establishment of the African Union, thus signaling greater emphasis on the economic structural transformation of the continent. It is not a coincidence that due to the emphasis now placed on structural transformation, we now have an Africa that is growing, more self-confident and playing a greater role on the global scene. In other words, we are on the cusp of an African Renaissance.

The theme of our celebrations rightly points to the umbilical link between Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance. This again reflects the evolving nature of pan-Africanism which while maintaining elements of unity, cultural heritage and freedom is now extended to integration, popular participation and a more assertive voice in global discourse. The African Renaissance requires integration of our fragmented economies into wider markets serviced by first rate infrastructure. The African Renaissance requires popular participation and mobilization of the African people behind the goals of structural transformation and improved governance. Indeed, Africa's Renaissance can only be complete when the African voice is heard and taken into account.

We are certainly making good progress by all accounts. However, before we get carried away by the positive assessments coming from the outside world, it is essential for Africa to recall its historical challenges, understand its current context and strive to control the narrative about its development prospects. In doing so, we must undertake our own frank analysis, generate robust home-grown statistics and reach our own conclusions on future directions for the continent. It is perhaps appropriate to recall in this regard the words of Patrice Lumumba who also asserted "Africa will write its own history and in both north and south, it will be a history of glory and dignity". This is why the Africa 2063 project of the African Union to which ECA and the AfDB are giving support deserves devoted energy from all: governments, private sector, civil society, women and youth groups alike must input into the agenda so that we come up with an all encompassing and implementable vision.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to mention some key strategic issues that need to be addressed in order to bring about the structural transformation of our continent.

First of all, Africa needs to review the nature of its relations with all others in the international community. No less a person than the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma reminded us in January that "We must ... take bold steps and fight for the pride of our place in the world, as a global growth pole." This means insisting on more profitable partnerships to reinforce the structural transformation of the continent. It means better negotiation of contracts. It means the ability to attract capital by dispelling myths and misunderstanding of conditions in the continent. It means saying enough when any endeavour is not in favour of Africa. It means Africa first.

This leads to the second strategic issue that I wish to bring to your attention. Africa needs to be off-radar with regards to conflicts be they inter-state, civil wars and insurgencies, terrorism, piracy and the like. This means better governance across the board. It means that we have to stem illicit financial flows and ensure participatory governance. To be candid, some of these conflict and governance issues continue to define Africa in the eyes of the outside world. Our continent might be no worse than other regions in such instances but it is upon us to not let this perception stick any longer. This is another important reason why Africans have to take control of the narrative about this continent. The point then is that we cannot continue to rely on received wisdom.

The third strategic issue that I then wish to raise relates to taking the lessons from history and from elsewhere to construct Africa's own transformative agenda. If we are conscious of this, then it becomes quite obvious that the state has an important contribution to make to development. This is with particular regard to industrial policy, the provision of infrastructure, the proper management of natural resources as well as research and development.

Chairperson,
Honourable Ministers,

The points I just made are not about any structural adjustment. That experience is fortunately no longer the reference even if resuscitated in many forms. Just as our forefathers and foremothers laid the foundation for our dignity and freedom from oppression, we have the collective responsibility to lay a sound basis for the prosperity of present and future generations. The trends are in our favour but we must do our part.

Thank you for your kind attention.

