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## The African Union Assembly launches the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) negotiations



**Johannesburg, South Africa – 15 June 2015.** The African Union Assembly launched the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) negotiations during the 25<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Summit of Head of States and Governments on 15 June in Johannesburg, South Africa. The CFTA negotiations were launched at a luncheon hosted by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H.E. Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma.

The launch of the Continental Free Trade Area negotiations was preceded by a High Level Panel discussion on the CFTA. The objective was to discuss the importance and benefits of the Continental Free Trade Area for Africa.

H.E. Macky Sall, President of Senegal pointed out that Africans trade only 12% of their merchandise among themselves and emphasized the urgent need for the continent to come together and establish one African Free Trade Area. “We now have to make a giant step to make the CFTA a reality”, he said. The President urged African countries to learn from the Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional group of fifteen countries which has implemented a single passport to facilitate the intra-regional movement of people and goods across the West Africa region. He also mentioned that trade-related infrastructure is key to the implementation of the CFTA. “Infrastructure has to be the priority and without it, trade between African countries will never be improved”, he stressed.

H.E. Mr. Uhuru Kenyatta, President of Kenya and one of the Champions of the CFTA, highlighted how important and critical the CFTA is for the Continent. For the President, the CFTA means, amongst others, prosperity, job creation for youth, peace and security and agricultural development. He noted that 6 out of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa and the CFTA will build one common African market and address the challenges of youth migration and poverty issues. He deplored the fact that Africa is still exporting its raw materials to third countries, depriving itself of the opportunity to create decent jobs for its people. He insisted that countries should remove artificial borders that fragment the African market. “I can assure everybody that the CFTA, if it is implemented, will benefit big and small countries. We just have to remove the artificial boundaries we have created for ourselves and that have been inherited from colonial times”, he said.

Representing the President of Ghana, H.E John Dramani Mahama also a Champion of the CFTA, Mrs. Hanna Tetteh, Minister of Foreign Affairs & Regional Integration pointed out that Ghana fully supports the implementation of the CFTA. “The CFTA is a vehicle to empower our young people to create jobs and a better life for our people”, she said.

The Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) H.E. Dr Carlos Lopez, welcomed the launch of the CFTA negotiations and noted that the Continent has made some progress in terms of economic growth but emphasized that this growth is not sustainable without industrialization and the creation of an internal African market.

The Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H.E Erastus Mwencha deplored the fact that currently it is so difficult to move across borders in Africa. He highlighted that an African trader faces a higher level of tariff protection when exporting within the continent than a trader from overseas. The CFTA is therefore an instrument to create favorable trading conditions for African traders. He urged countries to seriously address the issues of tariffs and non-tariff barriers during the CFTA negotiations.

The Commissioner for Trade and Industry of the African Union Commission, H.E Fatima Haram Acyl, applauded the Heads of State and Government for their commitment to the establishment of the CFTA. She reaffirmed the AU Commission's readiness to support Member States in the CFTA Negotiations. The Commissioner emphasized the importance of involving various stakeholders in the negotiations and implementation of the CFTA in particular the private sector. Regional Economic Communities (RECs), private sector, civil society, and strategic partners all have an important role to play in the CFTA negotiations under the leadership of African Member states.

"I am convinced that through the CFTA, we can put trade at the center and at the service of development and create economic opportunities and decent jobs for our youth here in Africa. Africa cannot afford to keep losing its young people to the Mediterranean Sea as they seek to migrate to Europe in search of jobs and greener pastures", she concluded..

Officially launching the CFTA negotiations, the Chairperson of the African Union and President of Zimbabwe H.E Robert Mugabe, welcomed the commencement of the negotiations and urged countries to learn from the Tripartite Free Trade Area among COMESA-EAC-SADC which was launched on 10 June 2015 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. He emphasized the importance of accelerated infrastructure and industrial development to enable the CFTA is to be an engine of economic growth and development for Africa.

The CFTA negotiations are expected to be concluded by the indicative date of 2017.

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