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**Statement
of
H.E Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma,
Chairperson of the African Union Commission,
on the occasion of
Africa Day at the XIV World Forestry Congress
7 September 2015, Durban South Africa**

**Your Excellency, Mr Senzeni Zokwana, Minister of Agriculture,
Forestry and Fisheries of South Africa,**

**Dr Jose Graziano da Silva, Director General Food and Agriculture
Organization (FAO),**

**Your Excellency, Mrs Tumusiime Rhoda Peace, AU Commissioner for
Rural Economy and Agriculture,**

**Dr Raymond Mbitikon, Secretary General, Central African Forestry
Commission,**

Dr Ibrahim Mayaki, CEO, NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is with great pleasure to welcome you to the 14th World Forestry Congress, which we as Africans are proud to host for the very first time. We are grateful to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the global community for this opportunity. My sincere appreciation goes to the Government and people of the Republic of South Africa for their warm welcome, gracious hospitality and excellent arrangements for this Congress.

The theme of “**Addressing Climate Change through Sustainable Forest Management**” is timely since the global community is working on finalizing discussions on important global processes with far-reaching consequences

on the sustainable management of the world's forest resources. The expected adoption of Sustainable Development Goals and the anticipated agreement on climate change at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, COP21 in Paris at the end of the year are beacons of hope to squarely put forests and the resources and services they provide in the development context. I trust that this Congress will provide further insights and opportunities as the global community concludes these landmark agreements.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, The African Union attaches high premium to African forests. Forests constitute one of the most ancient and most important habitats for humans and our precious wild flora and fauna; they constitute a source of livelihood in terms of fruits and food as well as wood for construction, just to mention but a few vital uses. They also constitute catchment areas for many of our invaluable rivers and lakes, which are key sources of fish and a means of transportation, in addition to them being also tourism destinations.

Our forests are considered among the three lungs of the world because of their sequestration of carbon from the atmosphere. This is a significant contribution by Africa to global solutions to climate change. Indeed, forests are recognized as indispensable in adapting to, and mitigating the negative impacts of climate change and desertification.

In light of these opportunities, challenges and prospects, the Africa Agenda 2063 portrays a continent whose forests and other natural resources are

sustainably managed for the inclusive growth and shared prosperity of all African peoples. Africa is taking bold steps in mainstreaming into the planning and development matrices aspects of sustainable natural resources management. The June 2014 Malabo Summit of the Africa Union called for the elaboration of a regional sustainable forest management framework, which will provide a vision and direction for forest management in Africa for the coming decades. Work on this draft framework has started in earnest, thanks to our partnership with FAO, the African Forest Forum and other partners.

Forests and woodlands in Africa occupy an estimated 650 million hectares (ha) or 21.8 per cent of the land area of this continent. This accounts for 16.8 per cent of the global forest cover. Many of the forests are severely fragmented due to the encroachment of an expanding human population and human activities such as agriculture and urbanization. We must therefore explore sustainable means for the necessary expansions and human activities.

The exploration of sustainable means ought to pay particular attention to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+). Africa, with the second largest contiguous block of forest in the world stands to benefit a lot from this mechanism provided that we put in place the right institutional and policy frameworks.

While per capita forest ratio in Africa is close to the world average of (0.185 ha/ person), the deforestation rate is 4 times the world's average at nearly 1% per annum. This is a serious challenge for the continent. We, therefore, hope that the holding of the 14th World Forestry Congress in Africa will be a watershed moment in stimulating political support and partnerships on forestry conservation, preservation and development. This Forum provides for us a reflective window of opportunity so that together we can explore pertinent challenges and strategies. In developing these strategies in relation to Africa I would suggest that we utilize Agenda 2063: the Africa We Want as the contextual canvass. Of importance to this forum is that Agenda 2063 and its first ten year implementation plan contain the principal adaptation processes and strategies to maintain healthy ecosystems, preserve the African natural environment.

This forum therefore could have not come at a better time for us and the theme of this conference is pertinent to fine tuning our Agenda 2063 plans in relation to the **mitigation and adaptation to climate change**. From our perspective, sustainable forest management is a sine-qua-non for addressing climate change and building resilient communities and nations.

For us, and the world, forests are important in determining the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. African forests store about a quarter of this total. However, this great storage capacity also means that when forests are cut down, the impact is disastrous. Deforestation accounts for nearly 20% of all greenhouse gas emissions. At

the same time, the capacity of the forest to act as a carbon sink is decreased as forests are lost or degraded. The effects of this degradation are also beginning to impact on our coastal forests which are known to help reduce risks from disasters relating to climate extremes and sea-level rise and coastal flooding.

Consequently, our forest management strategies must also complement our strategies that relate to the ocean and watering. This forum must therefore assist us in elaborating on practical mechanisms for sustainable land and coastal forest management in such a manner that it may assist us to deliver a range of livelihood and environmental benefits that help both people and ecosystems adapt to climate change. In the end these strategies must facilitate the lifting those who continue to live in poverty and hunger.

It is also important for this forum to note that the majority of malnourished global citizens reside in Africa. Thus sustainable forest management ought to address the need for **nutrition and food security**. Much of the expansion witnessed in the agricultural sector over the last decade occurred through encroaching into forestlands, This has been compounded by urban phenomenon such as expenditure which often has people unnecessarily replacing luxuries like furniture, thus leading to the cutting of more trees. These have led to the intensification of the problem of deforestation, soil erosion and general environmental degradation leading to widespread desertification on the continent. Deforestation triggered by

escalating demand for food, luxuries and fuel is degrading ecosystems, diminishing water availability especially for the poor. We must therefore find more technologically sound mechanisms to meet these needs and necessities.

To mitigate these effects we must encourage the growing of trees as they protect the soil and regulate water and microclimate. Projects such as Trees for Africa and those that intend to reforest the Sahel region require all of our urgent support, as they have also shown that crops grown in agroforestry systems are more resilient to drought, excess rainfall and extreme temperature fluctuations.

Honourable delegates, By encouraging reforestation and the sustainable utilization of forests we can also increase the food security of rural households. Forests are also the major source of grazing for domestic animals. These animals form an important component for food security and alleviating poverty especially among the rural population. Our ultimate goal should be the eradication of poverty, which will require all of us to embark on a path of **inclusive growth**.

Currently our forests account for between 6 to 8 per cent of GDP in Africa: the highest proportion in the world. In Central and West Africa, the forest sector contributes more than 60 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) through export of timber products. Africa's wood production

(including round wood and fuel wood) increased from 340 million cubic meters in 1980 to 699 million cubic meters in 2000.

However the forest, like all our natural resources, is not an infinite resource and so we must, as advocated for by Agenda 2063, encourage the diversification of our economies as we pursue the sustainable inclusive growth path.

Our growth path will also place added pressures on our **energy** sources. Fast-growing species of tree or woody shrubs can provide biomass or biofuel for heating or power generation. It is, therefore, an urgent imperative that we pursue sustainable ways of using biomass fuel, for example, through the use of energy efficient cooking stoves or alternative sources of energy such as solar and biogas.

We also know that the forests and woodlands of Africa are home to large varieties of flora and fauna species, many of which are endemic to the continent and are under increasing threat from population explosion. A key area of global concern for biodiversity conservation in Africa is the seemingly insatiable demand for ivory and rhino horns in the global market which is fuelling an unprecedented decimation of our major and iconic wildlife species, the elephant and the black rhino.

The **illegal trade in wildlife** prompted the African Union to call for serious measures at all levels to curb the trade in wildlife products.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the sustainable management of forests and forest ecosystems has a direct bearing on the **peace, security and stability** of the continent. Insurgence/militant groups often use illegally exploited forest products such as timber and fuel wood, to finance their activities. The trade in timber and wildlife is a classic example, which is supporting the proliferation of arms on the continent, thereby directly undermining our peace and development efforts. We, therefore, need to strengthen forest governance structures at all levels and enhance regional collaboration on forest resources management to enhance our surveillance capabilities to track and halt the activities of destructive groups. The fact that forests often traverse national boundaries means that they have the potential to nurture regional cooperation and promote peaceful co-existence among countries.

With forests and forestry being an important part of the agriculture sector where women are active players, Africa must continue to mainstream gender equality and strengthen the role of women in forest-related projects and programmes. 75% of farm workers are women. Modernising Agriculture by providing new technology and irrigation and making the agricultural land more productive will decrease the demand of more land and destruction of forests in order to increase Agricultural production. Processing the agricultural products means also more revenues.

Empowering women and youth in the forestry sector can create significant development opportunities and generate important spill over benefits for their households and communities, particularly in rural areas. Given their knowledge and roles in the forests and forestry sector, women need to be sufficiently represented in relevant institutions, accepted as stakeholders with specific opinions and interests, and empowered to have a say in transformative decisions. Efforts to empower women in the forestry sector include advocating for and enacting good governance systems for Biodiversity Conservation.

Provision of ecosystem services and the mitigation of climate change are now recognized as some of the important roles of forests and have become integral components of sustainable forest management.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, In conclusion, I would like to say that Africa suffers from a wide range of challenges. These challenges are attributed to factors such as the rapid population pressure, low investment especially in alternative sources of energy, and weak public sector institutions and policies on forest resource management. Government actions, therefore, need to be intensified to change the trajectory to address these concerns. These actions include actively engaging the private sector and civil society and enhancing the role of women and youth in forestry. In doing so, we must also explore sustainable woodland

resource management whilst also up scaling the capacities of public sector institutions that are responsible for forestry resource management.

I therefore call upon the international community to step up support to ensure sustainable forest management in Africa. This is more so because our forests are important global resources especially in the area of climate change mitigation in addition to their vitality for our livelihoods.

I would like to also take this opportunity to reiterate our appreciation for the strong partnership that we have with FAO in supporting forestry development in Africa. At the same time, I would like to use this platform to encourage FAO to do more in enhancing capacities to ensure the sustainable management of forests in Africa.

I wish to also reaffirm the commitment of the African Union to advance the cause of promoting and protecting our treasurable forests.

I thank you for your kind attention.