

AFRICAN UNION

الاتحاد الأفريقي



UNION AFRICAINE

UNIÃO AFRICANA

Addis Ababa, ETHIOPIA

P. O. Box 3243

Telephone: 011-551 7700

Fax: 011-551 7844

Website: www.africa-union.org E-mail: Chairperson@africa-union.org

**Statement of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission,
HE Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma
to the Emergency Meeting of the African Union Executive
Council on Ebola**

Addis Ababa, 8 September 2014

Your Excellency Madame Hindou Mint Ainina, Minister of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania for Magreb and African Affairs and and Chairperson of the Emergency Executive Council;

Your Excellencies, Members of the Executive Council, Foreign Ministers, Ministers of Health and Leaders of Delegations;

The Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Mr. Erastus Mwencha and other Commissioners;

Excellency, Dr. Carlos Lopes, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa;

Special Envoy on Gender of the President of the African Development Bank, Ms. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi;

Representatives of AU Organs;

Representatives of the Regional Economic Communities;

Representatives of the World Health Organisation and other International Organisations;

Excellencies, Members of the PRC, Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;

Distinguished Officials from Capitals;

Ladies and Gentlemen

We gather today at this Emergency Session of the Executive Council of the African Union, mindful of the words of one of the OAU founders, President Sekou Toure of Guinea, when he said: *“African unity is an essential factor in the human worth of every African, and in the advancement of every African nation.”*

It is our belief in this unity and the human worth of the victims of Ebola that died, those who are infected, and their families, neighbours, friends and communities, that brought us together today to craft a united, comprehensive and collective African response.

It is our solidarity with all the affected nations, in particular Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, which requires us to face this challenge with determination. Your

presence here today at such short notice, is testimony to your solidarity and determination to act together.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The Ebola virus found in animals and when transmitted to humans becomes very virulent, places great strains not only on families and communities, but also on the health services, institutions and cultural practices and traditions. This makes it particularly difficult for countries that have just emerged from conflict, and are still rebuilding their public institutions and services, social cohesion and public trust to cope. They therefore need a lot of support and solidarity from fellow African countries, and from the international community.

Because Ebola is so deadly, it creates a sense of mistrust and siege in families, neighborhoods, communities and countries, with each trying to protect its own. This drive to protect is the proper response, but must be done in a manner that does not fuel isolation, or lead to the stigmatization of victims, communities and countries. We must therefore ensure solidarity with those most affected, so that we assist their institutions to address this challenge.

We are therefore gathered here today at this Emergency Session of the AU Executive Council to show our solidarity, and to develop a collective, comprehensive, and coordinated strategy, so that our sisters and brothers, and the leadership of Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and other affected countries know that they are part of a broader, caring African and global family.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Women bear the brunt of this disease, as they are the ones who care for the sick, for children and family members and who prepare bodies for burial. They are therefore more likely to be infected by the disease, especially in the absence of protective clothing and access to health services. We are told that nearly 60% of Ebola deaths and infections are female, including nurses, cleaners and laundry workers.

The Ebola crisis highlighted the weaknesses of our public health systems, and the reasons for our frameworks that call for universal access, and people-centred and effective public health institutions. The *African Health Strategy 2007-2015* identified weak and under-resourced health systems as a major impediment to progress. This is particularly true for countries emerging from conflicts, who now have the added tragedy of health workers who died and some infected, in situations of already severe shortages of health personnel.

We also need faster movement on the operationalization of the African Centre for Disease Control so that we can share information, track the development of the disease and implement effective and coordinated responses.

As is the case with any public health emergency, public health education and trust are critical: information on how the disease is transmitted, how to prevent infections, what to do when someone is infected, how to care for those infected, to dealing with the burial of our dead, should be clearly transmitted to our citizens. Public education on Ebola is our collective responsibility, as government and non-government actors alike. We therefore call on the African media, on civil society, on artists and cultural workers, political parties, sports and faith-based organisations to work with governments, the Regional Economic Communities and the African Union to get accurate and clear messages out, to inform and educate, without sensationalization and causing panic.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

We must act together to assist those most affected, and we thank the World Health Organisation, Medecins Sans Frontiers, the UNHCR, the US Centre for Disease Control and many other international partners, as well as Member States who in practical terms, either through monetary contributions or medical supplies or health personnel, have risen to the occasion. We also thank the Staff association, for the contributions from AUC staff. This solidarity must be expanded and sustained, until we contain the epidemic.

We should ensure that Ebola does not spread to other countries, by implementing effective procedures to detect, isolate and treat those who may be

infected and protect the rest of the population from infections. At the same time, we must be careful not to introduce measures that place more averse social and economic impacts than the disease itself.

We welcome the work of WHO to speed up efforts on treatments and vaccines to halt the spread of Ebola, and, as one of its officials recently said: *“to change the sense that there is no hope”*¹. We also call on the scientific community and pharmaceutical companies, on the continent, in the Diaspora and elsewhere, to work together, even in the absence of a ‘business case’, as they say, for developing treatment and a vaccine.

The ECOWAS and AU Ministers of Health, and individual Member states have been seized with the matter, to coordinate support to the affected countries and deliberate on common responses. In addition, the AU Peace and Security Council of 19 August 2014 decided to deploy the AU-led Military and Civilian Humanitarian Mission comprising of medical doctors, nurses and other medical and paramedical personnel, as well as medical personnel from defense forces to the affected countries. This Emergency Session must consolidate this work, and ensure greater solidarity and coordinated support.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Whilst the priority is of course to deal with the disease and prevent its spread, we must also be mindful of the AU Peace and Security Council’s call in its Communiqué of 19 August 2014 for us to *‘pay particular attention to the impact of the epidemic on the post-conflict reconstruction and socio-economic development efforts in the countries affected.’*

This includes the impact on cross border trade and food security, as people are unable to trade and to work their fields, and so food prices are rising. We should take tough measures to halt the spread of the disease, but we must also put in place measures to enable agriculture to continue and support traders, the majority of whom are women.

¹ ‘WHO to ramp up Ebola experimental treatments, vaccine’, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/who-to-ramp-up-experimental-ebola-treatments-vaccines-1409962234>

In conclusion, as we finalise our responses to this grave challenge that confronts us all, we must be resolute about winning this battle, as part of our broader struggle to build the Africa we want, where all Africans enjoy a high standard of living, sound health and well-being, and with institutions that can respond to challenges such as the one we face today.

I wish this Emergency Session of the Executive Council fruitful discussions.

Thank you again for being here.