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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

**DELIVERED BY DR. JINMI ADISA, THE DIRECTOR,
CITIZENS AND DIASPORA DIRECTORATE (CIDO),
AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION TO THE FIRST AFRICAN
UNION INTERFAITH DIALOGUE FORUM,
15-17 JUNE 2010, ABUJA, NIGERIA**

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DIRECTOR, CITIZENS AND DIASPORA DIRECTORATE (CIDO), AFRICAN
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On behalf of His Excellency, Mr. Jean Ping, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission and his Deputy, His Excellency, Mr. Erastus Mwencha, I have the distinct honour to welcome religious leaders and representatives of various African religious communities from the different regions of the continent to this first ever African Union Interfaith Dialogue Forum.

The convening of this forum derives its impetus from the Constitutive Act of the Union. The defining feature of the African Union that sets it apart from its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity is that it is designed as a people-centered and people-driven organization that involves all the broad segments of society in the process of policy formation and implementation. In order to translate these prescriptions into action, the AU created a Citizens Directorate (CIDO) within the Commission to harness the contribution of all non-state actors. The AU also created formal and informal structures of engagement that would mainstream such interactions.

The formal structures for engagement for peoples' participation in the affairs of the AU include the Pan African Parliament (PAP) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC).

Significantly also, because of the diverse and unstructured character of the African Civil Society Community, which includes but goes far beyond advocacy groups or non-governmental Organizations(NGO's), the mandate of its Citizens Directorate is to adopt a pragmatic or flexible approach towards engaging civil society beyond the ambit of these formal structures. This includes a lateral approach that identifies and seeks intensive collaboration with critical and important segments of the non-state segment of society whose contributions are *sine qua* known for advancing the cause of justice, peace, security and sustainable development in Africa.

The convening of this Interfaith Forum is therefore, recognition that over and beyond other segments of society, the African Union must engage and collaborate with religious communities and religious leaders in order to promote effective integration, security and development on the continent.

This is because, Africans are by nature a very religious people and religion plays a critical role in African social and political life. Our perspective goes beyond the growing tendency to see religion as a motivation for violence and war to recognize its enduring value that helps prevent conflict among members of society by promoting tolerance and compassion. We acknowledge efforts of religious leaders that have brought about reconciliation, facilitated the resolution of other intractable conflicts, assisted in construction of broken societies and have served as platforms for strategic humanitarian action and development. We further acknowledge that established religions in all their variety have and will continue to provide the most extensive networks of Civil society in Africa and indeed the rest of the world.

It is within this framework that the African Union is here to initiate a structured platform of cooperation and close collaboration with this important segment of society that is closely interrelated with and simultaneously, set up from and rises above others. We seek a functional alliance between political and religious leaders of the continent in the service of mother Africa.

The vision, content and thrust of this functional association will be laid out in the keynote address of His Excellency, Mr. Erastus Mwencha, the Deputy Chairperson of the Commission. His Excellency has reviewed the outcome of the preparatory work that our Directorate with the Steering Committee of continental religious leaders agreed upon this meeting with a view to providing a blueprint for actions that will be developed in concert with religious leaders.

I am not in the position to foretell these prescriptions but based on the direction that our Directorate has received, I can say clearly to this Assembly that it is certain to have three elements. First is that it will go beyond the normal and procedural. The proposed platform of cooperation would be stronger than the procedures of observer status to the African Union or the

establishment of liaison offices to seek true partnership. Second is that the proposed partnership would be one of mutual determination, co-planning and implementation. Third is that the way forward will be guided by the revolutionary wisdom of J. S Lewis that those professing neutrality in governance situations are often just seeking to disguise their satisfaction with the status quo. “If you are not part of the solution, then you must be part of the problem”. Thus the African Union recognizes that religious differences can be used to promote conflict. It also believes strongly however, that religious communities and religious leaders are an integral and important part of the solutions to problems and predicaments facing Africa.

On this note, I would like to thank our hosts in the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council particularly the Sultan of Sokoto, Al Hajj Saad Abubakar, the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, His Grace Dr. John Onaiyekan for their invaluable support and assistance to this programme. I would also like to extend these thanks to Prof. Ishaq Oloyede, the Coordinator/ Executive Secretary of NIREC for technical partnership in this process. I must thank the ACRL as the Convenor of the Steering Committee especially its Secretary General Dr. Mustafa Ali as well as all members of the interim Steering Committee from various religious persuasions that Dr. Mustafa will recognize subsequently.

I should also like to thank the Federal Government of Nigeria for the strong material and political support to this programme through NIREC. Finally; I wish to thank my principals in Addis Ababa particularly, His Excellencies Mr. Ping and Mr. Mwencha and the Chief of staff, Bureau of the Chairperson, Amb. John Shinkaiye for their continued, unwavering and sustained interest and support for this Interfaith Dialogue.

As the Dialogue progresses, there will be more room for formal thanks. This is just to show gratitude to all those who have made this event possible.

I thank you all.