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SPEECH

OF

HER EXCELLENCY MRS. TUMUSIIME RHODA PEACE,

COMMISSIONER FOR RURAL ECONOMY AND AGRICULTURE OF THE

AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

AT THE JOINT CELEBRATIONS OF AFRICA ENVIRONMENT AND

WANGARI MAATHAI DAY AND WORLD WILDLIFE DAY

MARCH 3, 2015, NAIROBI, KENYA

Your Excellency Uhuru Kenyatta, President of the Republic of Kenya

Your Excellency, The First Lady

Honourable Prof. Judi Wakhungu, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Water and Natural Resources

Honourable Cabinet Secretaries responsible for other portfolios

Your Excellency....., Director General of the United Nations Office in Nairobi (UNON)

Your Excellency Angelina Wapakhabulo, High Commissioner of the Republic of Uganda representing the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps,

Heads of Diplomatic Missions and UN Agencies

Your Excellency Met Wilk, representing the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP),

Excellences Ladies and Gentlemen

All Protocol Observed,

Your Excellency, allow me to extend to you warm greetings and best wishes from your sister, Dr. Nkozasana Dlamini Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union Commission and thank you and your government for graciously ~~hosting this~~[hosting this](#) auspicious occasion. The ~~dedication~~[dedication of](#) the government of the Republic of Kenya to the principles of environmental conservation and sustainable utilization of natural resources has been amply demonstrated.

Your Excellency, your global contribution to the causes of Africa is highly appreciated by the African Union.

The celebrations today are significant from several dimensions. Firstly, they provide a platform to raise awareness on the numerous environmental challenges facing our dear continent. The rate

of degradation of our forests, land, biological and water resources, has increased to an alarming level. These challenges have been aggravated by the continuing menaces of climate change and desertification. We must tighten our belts to overcome these problems if we are to consolidate the gains we have registered in the last few years in our fight against poverty and underdevelopment and ensure the prosperity of African citizens now and in future.

The celebration, Your Excellency, on the other hand offers us the opportunity to honour and remember the life and work of late Professor Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Peace Laureate and the Founder of the Greenbelt Movement. This illustrious daughter of Africa epitomized environmental conservation and sustainable co-existence between man and nature. Her efforts led to greater political commitment and engagement for sustainable development and natural resources conservation not only in Africa but the world over. Her achievements, as you have heard from previous speakers, in championing the cause of grassroots' women and other marginalized groups and the preservation of the Congo Basin Forests, among others, shall endure in our hearts and minds and in the life of our continent.

It was with this sobering reflection that the Assembly of the African Union Heads of State and Government in January 2012 called for the joint celebration of the Africa Environment and Wangari Maathai Day. Since then, this joint celebration has been held in several AU Member States representing the geographical regions of the continent; so far in Chad, Tunisia, last year: Lesotho and now Kenya. We also celebrate World Wildlife Day, while acknowledging that Wildlife is, indeed, an integral part of our environment which merits its conservation and sustainable use. It is an important natural endowment for Africa which contributes immensely to our socio-economic development. I, therefore, salute Your Excellency and your government for combining the celebrations which are meant to promote Africa's sustainable development.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the issue of wildlife conservation and illegal trade in wildlife products has gained prominence in the priorities of the African Union over the last few years. Your Excellency would recall that it was in June 2014 in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, that the African Union adopted the landmark decision on African Wild Flora and Fauna Conservation and Illegal Trade Wildlife.

This decision was spurred by the concern over the unsustainable utilization and conservation of Africa wild flora and fauna and the dramatic escalation of illegal exploitation and trade in wild flora and fauna in recent years, depriving African nations of their natural capital and cultural heritage thus undermining sustainable development as well as peace, security, rule of law and good governance in the continent. On the same note, our salutes go to the fallen heroes and heroines who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the course of defending Africa's wildlife, and I thank Your Excellency for honouring these African women and men.

African Environment Day celebration this year is also special in its theme on **Empowering Women for Sustainable Natural Resources Management**. The theme draws inspiration from **the AU 2015 Year of Women's Empowerment and Development towards the Agenda 2063**. For Africa to attain the espoused vision of Agenda 2063, we must continue to pay attention to building the capacities of women and enhancing their productivity and managerial skills of small scale women farmers in particular so that their potential is unleashed for the better of our continent. Mark you, women form more than 50% of the population of Africa.

Your Excellency, there is an increasing appreciation of the role of women in environmental stewardship in Africa. Indeed, women are closest to nature. They till the land for crop production, fetch water, collect fuel wood and medical products and plant and tender trees. Women form the bulk of farmers and produce a greater part of the foods we eat every day. Their activities in the fields thus impact on the landscape and determine the health of the ecosystem.

If women were to down their tools, there would be a shock and crisis. Therefore, women should be empowered and capacitated to access productive resources like land and water as well as technologies to enable them reduce the drudgery that otherwise pushes them into degrading the ecosystem. As part of the series of events of the celebrations, the African Union Commission in collaboration with Your Excellency's Government, UNEP, ICRAF and the Greenbelt Movement is organizing a Women and Environment Forum on March 4th at the ICRAF Headquarters in Gigiri. The objective of the Forum is to provide a platform for women to debate on their achievements, challenges and opportunities in the realm of environment and natural resources management. The Forum will come with recommendations on policy and institutional reforms

necessary to promote and consolidate women's participation in the stewardship of Africa's natural heritage with the support and collaboration of our men folks.

We look forward to a successful Africa Environment Day/Wangari Maathai Day and World Wildlife Day.

Long live African solidarity and our natural heritage.

I thank Your Excellency, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, for your kind attention.