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**KEY NOTE SPEECH BY THE COMMISSIONER, POLITICAL AFFAIRS,  
AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION, DR. AISHA I. ABDULLAHI**

**At the National Conference on Religious Tolerance and Coexistence  
in Ethiopia,**

**August 27, 2013**

**Your Excellency, Mr. Hailemariam Dessalegn, Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia;**

**Your Excellences' Deputy Prime Ministers;**

**Honourable Ministers, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,**

**Distinguished Members of Ethiopia Inter Religious Council**

**Head of Religious Institutions present**

**Excellences' Ambassadors and Heads of Diplomatic Missions**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good Morning!

On behalf of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H. E. Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs, and the Ethiopian Inter Religious Council (EIRC) for inviting the African Union Commission to this important Conference. I bring you greetings and a message of goodwill from the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, who would have loved to have been with you this morning but due to other commitments requested that I represent her and I was more than glad to oblige. As many of you may recollect, this joint noble mission between the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs and the Ethiopian Inter Religious Council (EIRC) commenced in January 2010. I am particularly glad that the two critical stakeholders continue to work together to promote religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence in the country.

Your Excellency,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Historically speaking, religion has been one of the most progressive agents of peace, and peaceful co-existence among the various ethnic and social groups in the world. Although religion may differ in approach and methodologies, one thing remains common to all, particularly the ones that are currently active in Africa, and that is the campaign for, and preaching of love and peaceful co-existence among the citizens.

Recently however, some of the conflicts and crises that our continent is experiencing today are not unconnected with ethnic and religious intolerance. The ongoing Islamic militants in the Sahel and the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda and the DRC are examples that readily come to mind. The effects of religious crisis on national development, peace and harmony cannot be overemphasized. Innocent lives are lost, the social fiber is shredded, national development is stunted, and foreign investments are discouraged. It is on this note that we cannot afford to handle religious intolerance with levity.

There are various ways a country can prevent religious and ethnic conflict crises. One of these includes adequate provisions and effective implementation of the provisions in the national Constitution. The Ethiopian Constitution provides for religious equality and beliefs. It also guarantees non-interference of the Government in religious activities. We therefore need to put effort to ensure that these provisions are effectively implemented. This Conference provides us an opportunity to implement the progressive provisions on religious matters in the Constitution.

Your Excellency  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another way to overcome ethnic intolerance and conflict crises in any country is by putting in place, a national formal framework that promotes peaceful co-existence and inclusivity among the various religious and ethnic groups. I congratulate the Government of the Republic of Ethiopia and the various key religious leaders in this great country for recognizing this fact, and for teaming up these two key stakeholders to promote national peace and sustainable unity.

The principles of tolerance, empathy, sharing and dialogue, to mention but a few are fundamental to national peaceful co-existence and development in any country. I am happy that these principles are recognized by the Government of Ethiopia and they form the basis of the Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council formation. It is on this note that I commend the formation of the Ethiopia Inter Religious Council, and the promotion of constructive relationship that between the Council and the Government of Ethiopia.

As some of you may be aware, the Department of Political Affairs of the African Union Commission has the mandate of promoting the entrenchment of Democracy, holding of credible Elections, Human Rights, and Governance, constitutionalism and rule of law, and the Humanitarian Affairs on the continent.

Our overall objective is to promote good governance, peaceful coexistence among the citizens, and deepening of human rights practices among the AU Member States. In doing this, the Department has facilitated the promulgation of several normative frameworks to accomplish the above missions; these include the African Charter on Democracy, Election and Governance and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

Time will not permit me to take us through all the relevant provisions of these instruments on the issue at hand, but please permit to cite Article 28 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. *It provides that every individual shall have the duty to respect and consider his fellow beings without discrimination (including religious, ethnic, and Cultural), and to maintain relations aimed at promoting, safeguarding and*

*reinforcing mutual respect and tolerance.* If this provision is adopted and implemented, peaceful coexistence in all aspect of life will be guaranteed.

In the same vein, Chapter three of the AU Charter on Democracy, Election and Governance also provide for democratic principles that recognize respect for human and religious rights. In order to ensure effective operationalization of this provision, my department has been working across the continent campaigning for the signing, ratification and implementation of the Charter to promote peaceful co-existence and tolerance among the various religious and ethnic groups in Africa. DPA did not stop there, it has also developed a Human Rights Strategy to promote and protect religion rights and tolerance on the continent.

Effective implementation of the above two AU Instruments will not only promote national renaissance in Ethiopia, it will also contribute to actualization of Pan Africanism and African Renaissance.

Your Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On Humanitarian Affairs, Refugee and Displace Persons, the Department's experience, has shown that religious intolerance has significantly contributed to the increase in the number of Refugee Camps and Displaced Persons in Africa. This experience has not been pleasant. With this type of Conference, I am optimistic that Africa is on the right path to overcoming the challenge of Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons caused by religious crisis on the continent.

Whilst the DPA has been working tirelessly to improve the conditions of the Refugees and internally displaced persons on the continent. This work requires huge human and financial resources. Africa is today spending Millions of Dollars on Refugees and Internally displaced persons. We can reduced the quantum of these tragedies if all the AU Member States domesticated and implement accordingly the above two normative frameworks on good governance and human rights. **Your Excellency**, it is on this note that I am calling on the Government of Ethiopia to ratify the African Charter on

Democracy, Election and Governance and to implement accordingly, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

As we look forward at the level of the Commission to partner with the Government of Ethiopia and EIRC on this noble mission, I am optimistic that the country's long history of religious tolerance, hospitality, peaceful co-existence and respect among the different religious communities will be sustained.

Before I conclude this remarks, **Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen**, let me on behalf of the African Union Commission express my profound appreciation and gratitude to the Ethiopia Ministry of Federal Affairs and the Ethiopia Inter Religious Council for organizing this conference and for inviting the Commission to take part in the event.

Finally, the commitment to the promotion of religious tolerance, peaceful co-existence and mutual respect among the various religious groups in the country will go a long way to promote national unity and sustainable peace and development

I wish you all a fruitful deliberations and outcomes.

I thank you.