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DELIVERED ON HER BEHALF BY:

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AT

AT THE ABANT FORUM

**ON THE THEME “FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND RESPECT FOR
THE SACRED”**

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

8 MARCH 2014

Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

All Protocols Observed

Happy International Women's Day

I am pleased to be with you this morning to deliver this welcome address on behalf of H.E. Dr. Aisha Abdullahi, the Commissioner for Political Affairs of the African Union Commission. The Commissioner would have loved to be with us not only to deliver this message but also to interact with you during this important dialogue forum on such a pertinent theme namely 'Freedom of Expression & Respect to the Sacred' co-convened by the African Union and the Journalists and Writers Foundation. But other prior commitments could not allow this to happen.

You will recall that during the 2013 Forum held in Istanbul, the honourable Commissioner for Political Affairs noted that the Abant Forum provides a unique platform to bounce off ideas on contemporary thematic issues with implications for democratisation, human rights, peace and stability around the globe. Such platforms as this play a critical role in helping us to dialogue on how best to anchor peace, stability and democracy on a firmer footing and in the process sharing lessons and best practices on dealing with threats of instability early enough through preventive diplomacy. As the English cliché goes, prevention is better than cure. This saying applies forcefully to the freedom of expression and the respect for the sacred. If we do not prevent reckless and hate speech and its dissemination early enough, the consequences are dire as have seen with the Rwanda Genocide of 1994 and the devastating effects of Apartheid in South Africa, just to cite only a few examples.

The theme of this year's Forum is both timely and pertinent. It is timely given that in today's globalised world marked by social media, information spreads as fast as wild fire and it can have adverse effects if not well managed. It is pertinent in that it allows us to interrogate the challenge of maintaining balance between the freedom of expression and the responsibilities that such freedom confers on everyone. While the forum interrogates what other scholars have termed the clash of civilisations, it also allows us to promote mutual respect and tolerance for peoples and societies including their sacred beliefs, religions and monuments. Part of the on-going war in the Central African Republic today has to do with intolerance that has witnessed massive killings of Moslems by Christians and vice versa.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Freedom of Expression is regarded as the right of every individual to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Freedom of expression as a core principle of democracy guarantees the ability of the governed to play active roles in development of their societies. Alongside access to information, freedom of expression allows the governed to make informed decisions and choices on the trajectory of development in their societies and build constituencies and alliances around such a development path.

The African Union has been (and continues to be) the key guardian of fundamental human rights at the continental level in Africa. As the premier inter-governmental body on the continent, the AU has developed an expansive and robust normative framework for the promotion and protection of human rights. The right to freedom of expression within the AU normative framework is codified in the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights; and specifically in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa which was adopted by the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) at its 32nd Ordinary Session held in October 2002.

The implementation of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression is the responsibility of the AU Member States. It is monitored by the African Commission based in Banjul, The Gambia. In order to ensure a more systematic and coordinated monitoring over AU Member States, the Commission appoints the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression a position currently occupied by Advocate Pansy Tlakula who is also the Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission of the Republic of South Africa. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression as a mechanism was established by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights with the adoption of Resolution 71 at the 36th Ordinary Session held in Dakar, Senegal in 2004. The Rapporteur, among other things, is charged with the mandate to analyse national media legislation, policies and practice within Member States with a view to monitor their compliance with freedom of expression standards. In addition, the Special Rapporteur undertakes missions to Member States to investigate violations of the right to freedom of expression and make appropriate recommendations to the African Union policy organs for appropriate action within the confines of the Union's Constitutive Act adopted in 2000.

In 2007, at its 42nd session held in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights decided to renew and expand the mandate of the Special Rapporteur with additional responsibility for driving the AU Agenda on Access to Information in Africa.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The essence of these efforts is to create a more conducive environment for African people to freely express their thoughts and opinions about issues that have bearing on their socio-economic and political development. In expressing their thoughts and opinions, African citizens are implored to do with utmost responsibility avoiding incitement which in turn threatens peace and stability. They are reminded that freedom of expression and access to information must

go hand-in-glove with accountability on the use of information and consequences that come with that.

Although Africa still has a long way to go before we can talk about full protection and promotion of human rights including the freedom of expression, some modest progress is underway. For instance, the recent Afrobarometer report entitled 'The Partnership of Free Speech & Good Governance in Africa'¹ notes that more than half of Africans surveyed in 34 countries across the continent say they are "completely free" to say what they think, while another quarter say they are "somewhat free".

This modest achievement on the Continent is in sharp contrast to the situation that prevailed over the past three decades when most African countries were emerging from dictatorial regimes of one-party, military and other forms. Such regimes had little tolerance for fundamental freedoms and dissent. Today, the proliferation of media outlets; both traditional and new social media are revolutionising the freedom of expression landscape on the Continent. But this seemingly positive development may also become a bad omen given that the social media some times are used for incitement, hate speech and reckless speech that set societies ablaze.

This is exactly where the dilemma lies. On one hand, we need to expand the space for citizen's engagement and participation engendered by freedom of expression and access to information. On the other, freedom of expression and access to freedom without restraints and limits is a recipe for political disorder, instability and violent conflicts. We therefore need to insist on the need for Freedom with Responsibility; Freedom with Accountability; Freedom with Tolerance and above all Freedom with Respect. This is why I am convinced about not only the timeliness, but also the pertinence of this forum today.

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I conclude, let me make a modest contribution as to how Africa can entrench a culture of freedom of expression and access to information while at the same time promoting democracy, peace and stability.

Firstly, all AU Member States must recognise both through their constitutions and political culture that freedom of expression and access to information comes with the responsibility of each citizen to respect and tolerate others. As citizens express their own freedoms, they should respect and tolerate others to enjoy their own freedoms too.

Secondly, freedom of belief, opinions and one's cultural heritage should not threaten others from enjoying their own cultural beliefs. This calls for constructive management of diversity especially as it relates to religion. The mayhem caused by senseless killing of innocent people by Boko Haram in Nigeria is a major cause of concern for religious freedom and tolerance on our continent today.

Thirdly, freedom of expression should not be interpreted as freedom to destroy societies, but rather freedom to build societies in a harmonious manner. It is easy to destroy a society and in a short space of time. It is difficult to build socio-cultural resilience of societies and it takes longer. It is therefore important to invest more in building rather than destroying.

Fourthly, the sterling efforts of the ACHPR and the African Court on Human and People's Rights in respect of their mandate to promote and protect human rights must be supported fully by all AU Member States and the international community so that the architecture for the freedom of expression is anchored on a more solid institutional foundation.

Fifth and finally, as you are probably aware by now, the African Union is developing the AU Agenda 2063 which is a long-term development

vision of the continent over the next fifty years. This long-term development vision cannot succeed without it being anchored on solid foundations of democracy, peace and stability. This foundation for the AU Agenda 2063 will require the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms including the freedom of expression and access to information while at the same time combatting incitement, inflammatory and reckless speech. Wars and political instability that has been generated by intolerance has cost African countries immensely. The social groups that have been hardest hit by protracted violent conflicts in Africa including the current ones in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and South Sudan include women, youth and children.

In conclusion, I hope and trust that this forum facilitates the launch of a global campaign on discouraging abuse of freedom of expression using the various instruments developed by the United Nations Human Rights Council particularly its 16/18 Resolution on 'Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or beliefs'. I believe this can be a complimentary effort to our drive for universal guarantee of the freedom of expression and access to information.

On this International Women's Day, we must recommit ourselves to ensure that freedom of expression and respect for religious freedoms embrace the fundamental rights of women and girls globally and specifically in Africa.

Let me thank the Journalists and Writers Foundation for collaborating with the African Union Commission in hosting this Forum here in Addis Ababa, the African Capital and the seat of the African Union.

I thank you all for your attention