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Welcome Statement

**REGIONAL YOUTH CONSULTATIONS ON PROJECT 2016 YEAR OF
HUMAN RIGHTS WITH A PARTICULAR FOCUS ON THE RIGHTS OF
WOMEN**

**Dr. Khabele Matlosa
Director for Political Affairs
African Union Commission**

**23 August 2016
Ramada Resort, Accra, Ghana**

Representative of the Government of the Republic of Ghana, Mr. Solomon Tetteh Mensah

**Regional Director of the National Democratic Institute, Dr. Keith Jennings
Representatives from the African Union Organs as members of the African Governance Architecture Platform, especially the African Union Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights**

Representative of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Mr. Eyesan Okorodudu

Members of the AGA Secretariat

Colleagues from the African Union Commission, especially the Head of the AGA Cluster on Human Rights and Transitional Justice, Amb. Salah Hammad

Representative of other AUC Departments including the Peace and Security Department represented by Dr. Salvator Nkeshimana and the Youth Division of the Human Resources, Science and Technology

Distinguished Resource Persons and participants

Representatives of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to be with you during this first youth consultation, which forms part of the commemoration of the African Year of Human Rights with Special Focus on the Rights of Women. On behalf of the Commissioner for Political Affairs, H.E. Dr. Aisha Laraba Abdullahi, let me welcome you all to the Regional Youth Consultation for the West African Region. From the word go, I would like to extend our gratitude to the Government of Ghana for graciously hosting us in Accra. Let me also extend my gratitude to our partners, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) for their support to the convening of this consultation. I also welcome on board, Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) and acknowledge their contribution to the regional youth dialogue series for the year 2016. We hope to deepen our collaboration and partnership with NDI and VSO going forward within the spirit of the Youth Engagement Strategy of the African Governance Architecture (AGA) of the African Union (AU).

About a couple of weeks ago, I was in Zambia with the African Union Election Observation Mission, which witnessed the just ended elections in that country. Zambians were called upon to exercise their right to elect their leadership at four levels (a) the President and Vice President; (b) Members of Parliament; (c) Mayors/Chairpersons of Councils and (d) Councilors. Concurrently with these four ballots, Zambians had to vote 'yes' or 'no' in a Referendum aimed at the inclusion of a justiceable Bill of Rights in the new Constitution covering largely the provision, protection and promotion of socio-economic and cultural rights to citizens by the state. The AU accompanied Zambians in this important exercise

with a view to ensure that the elections are conducted in such a manner that advances democratization and human rights, guarantees peace, security and stability and promotes popular sovereignty. Two features we witnessed about this election, which are relevant for our discussion during this youth consultation today and tomorrow stood out and are worth highlighting.

Firstly, we learnt that youth were organized along party lines in formations akin to militias. In Zambia, however, they are not called militias, but rather 'party cadres'. A lot of pre-election political violence, which claimed one life of a young woman was attributed to the rampage unleashed by these youthful 'party cadres'. This amounts to negative participation of youth in electoral politics. It is this type of participation of young people in politics that needs to be discouraged and eradicated totally. Secondly, we also witnessed with our own eyes large numbers of young women and men participating as part of conflict management committees, voters, polling officers and party agents across the country, which contributed immensely in ensuring that the Peace Pledge that various parties signed ahead of the elections guaranteed peace during and in the immediate aftermath of the elections. Although, actual data on voter turnout disaggregated by age and gender is yet to come out, anecdotal evidence suggests that, young women and men participated in large numbers in these elections. In contrast to the behavior of party cadres, this type of youth participation in the democratic process was positive and added value to the peace dividend during the election and immediately afterwards.

I am citing these two aspects of youth participation in the recent Zambian election in order to make a point. As we deliberate over the next two days, we need to aim to find practical strategies for eradicating negative participation of young people in politics, which perpetrate election-related violence. We need to inculcate a culture of positive participation of young people in Africa's democratization process and peace-building. Positive participation of youth in democratization and peace-building augurs well for their contribution to socio-economic development and transformation of the African continent. Only positive participation (and not negative participation) will ultimately rid African politics of the historically embedded culture of violence and recurrent conflicts as the African Union aims to silence all guns and end all wars by the year 2020.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted that the West Africa Regional Youth Consultation is taking place in Accra, Ghana. Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana is renowned as the cradle of Pan-Africanism that gave birth to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the African Union (AU). Contemporary Ghana is also a shining beacon of

democratic governance not only in West Africa, but the whole African continent. Since its historic transition from military-style dictatorship in the 1990s, Ghana has cemented its status as a peaceful, democratic, cohesive and stable society according to the 2015 Ibrahim Governance Index. Ghana is called upon to preserve this status as the country gears up to its presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2016. The African Union is already making efforts to accompany Ghana in its endeavor to deepen its democratic culture and practice. A democratic and peaceful Ghana contributes immensely to the democratization process and peace-building in the entire West Africa region and, by extension, the whole African continent. The AU is alive to this stark reality. In order to assist Ghana deepen its democratic governance and its tradition of peaceful elections, the AU undertook a pre-election assessment mission to Ghana in May 2016 working closely with the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and the Accra-based Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG). Further more, the AU together with the United Nations and the Economic Community of West African States fielded a joint High-Level Good Offices mission in early August 2016, which consulted various Ghanaian stakeholders encouraging them to ensure that the upcoming elections promote democratization and peace in Ghana. To this end, this youth consultation, taking place here in Accra, should contribute to the various calls for young Ghanaian women and men to contribute positively to the upcoming elections and avoid negative influences. They should avoid getting involved in election-related violence. Rather, they should get involved in peace councils/committees. They should get involved as voters. They should get involved as polling staff. They should get involved as party agents. This message aimed at the Ghanaian youth should resonate in all ECOWAS member states during elections and in between elections. Youth should contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights and not their violation.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Our meeting today is directly linked to the declaration of the year 2016 as the African Year of Human Rights with Special Focus on the Rights of Women by the AU Policy Organs. Since 1981 when the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) adopted the African Charter on Human and peoples' Rights and subsequently established the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 1987, the continental body has pursued with vigour the ideal of continent respectful of human rights including the rights of women and young people.

But the main impediment during the OAU was the then pervasive doctrine of non-interference in internal affairs of Member States which inhibited OAU intervention in acute human rights abuse situations such as in Idi Amin's Uganda, Jean-Bedel Bokassa's CAR and Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire, to name but a few examples. The transformation of the OAU into the AU has augmented the continental body's resolve to promote and protect human rights in a much more pro-active manner. The old OAU doctrine of non-interference in internal affairs of Member States has been jettisoned and replaced by the new AU doctrine of non-indifference to human rights abuses within Member States including mass atrocities, crimes against humanity and genocide. The AU has vowed that never again shall we witness genocide as it happened in 1994 in Rwanda. This is a powerful human rights norm, which has also been reinforced by the establishment of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2006.

But a gap still exists between the norm and policy practice on the ground. For instance, the current human rights situations in Burundi and South Sudan today remain a worrying development for not only the concerned countries but the AU too. While the AU norm on inculcating a culture of human rights is laudable and commendable, it always has to contend with the power of state sovereignty from its Member States. It is here that the clash between narrow national sovereignty and supranationality confronts the AU, which is merely an intergovernmental body and not a full-fledged supranational entity unlike the European Union (EU). In order to address this conundrum, the AU needs a major restructuring towards supranationalism and to this end, AU Member States should be encouraged to cede part of their sovereignty to the continental body, for instance through free movement of persons and the introduction of the African passport officially launched during the AU Summit held in Kigali, Rwanda in July 2016. The AU plans to adopt the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in Africa by January 2018, which will aim to open up borders for Africans to move freely throughout their continent with less VISA restrictions. Ghana is one of the countries which are relaxing VISA restrictions for Africans with valid travel documents. Free movement of persons will allow African youth to enjoy their right of movement across their continent for various purposes including study, business, leisure etc.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As I conclude, let me propose five (5) key issues that pose major challenges to the African continent in its efforts to advance democratization and promote a culture of human rights with a view to provoke debate during the next two days.

Firstly, Africa's pursuit for democracy and a human rights culture suffers from weak institutions and strong personalities that overshadow institutional architectures in place. In a majority of African countries, institutions are weak and dysfunctional. Most invariably, the only strong institutions are the security establishment especially the military. This trend often leads to militarization of politics and politicization of the military. This trend needs to be arrested. Politics should be demilitarized. The military should be depoliticized. This calls for deliberate efforts to build effective and resilient democracy institutions that are capable of functioning almost independently above personal interest of the political elite. This calls for transformative and visionary leadership. Africa's youth have a big role to play in this regard.

Secondly, African economies are impoverished, enfeebled and externally dependent. Given this stark reality, the African state is a highly prized political asset for the political elites. This is because the private sector is so miniscule in a number of countries that politics itself is perceived as business. Come elections, contestation for state power tends to be perceived as war by other means. Occupying the state is pursued by all means even if it means trampling on other's fundamental human rights. Africa needs a major socio-economic transformation as outlined in the Africa Agenda 2063 with a view to address poverty, exclusion, inequality and unemployment through, inter alia, fair and just redistribution of national wealth. This will require, among others, combatting illicit financial flows from Africa, especially the exploitation of its natural resources and eradicating corruption. The Mbeki report commissioned by UNECA and the AU estimates that Africa loses about USD 50 billion pr annum through illicit financial flows. If Africa gets its development trajectory right and curbs illicit financial flows and corruption, the continent is likely to go a long way in balancing the pursuit for political rights and civil liberties with the protection and promotion of socio-economic and cultural rights.

Thirdly, in Africa, there is still a problem of equating elections with democracy and vice-versa. Conventional wisdom has it that so long as a country holds regular multi-party elections, such a country is therefore democratic. The logic of this conventional wisdom goes thus: the more elections a country holds, the more democratic it is. This belief amounts to what is termed in contemporary democracy discourse 'the fallacy of electoralism' which means that elections are synonymous with democracy. This thinking equates democracy with the quantity and frequency of elections only. It does not probe into the quality of elections for purposes of the advancement of democracy especially in between elections. Elections are just a part of the democracy project. In between elections, African countries need to ensure that democratic culture and practice exist including by inculcating a culture of human rights. In this context, the rights

of marginalized social groups such as women, youth, minorities and people with disabilities must be guaranteed.

Fourthly, one of the major challenges for democratization and advancement of human rights in Africa today is the scourge of terrorism, fundamentalism and violent extremism. This manifests in the form of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb Region for North Africa including the Sahel Region, Boko Haram in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin and Al-Shabab in Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa. Global terrorism has considerably contributed to the current state of democratic recession including on our continent in Africa. Because of terrorism and violent extremism, democracy promotion and democracy building are pushed into the background as security and stability are prioritized. In this context, the rights of young people are also compromised. But some young people also get recruited into these terrorist networks largely due to their socio-economic condition of poverty, exclusion, inequality and unemployment. Youth empowerment in conformity with the 2006 African Youth Charter can go a long way in insulating youth from radicalization and falling prey to terrorist groups.

Fifthly, we are also witnessing the shrinking civic space in Africa in which the state becomes everything and in the process civil society seems to be in retreat, including the women's movement and youth formations. Democracy, peace and development cannot be the preserve of the state alone. These three major imperatives for continental unity and integration in Africa should be the joint responsibility of the state, civil society and the private sector working in concert. Civil society should be allowed free space to operate and advance the rights of citizens and restrain the power of the state. States ought to be responsive to citizen's interests, fears and aspirations. States should not trample citizens' rights underfoot. States should avoid clampdown on media including social media. State should ensure both horizontal (between and among the three key arms of government, namely the executive, legislature and the executive) and vertical accountability (between the government and the people). The state should ensure the independence of the judiciary. Parliaments should hold the executive branch accountable. Opposition parties should be allowed space to contest during election through a level playing field. It is also imperative to establish and/or strengthen semi-autonomous democracy promotion institutions such as the human rights commissions, the Ombudsman, anti-corruption bodies, independent electoral commissions etc.

How can we address these challenges in West Africa as we strive towards a democratically governed Africa respectful of human rights, justice and rule of law? Africa's youth have to provide practical answers to these vexing questions confronting African democracy today. Toward extent can we make sure that the

evolving 10-Year African Human Rights Action Plan addresses these challenges, among others? We hope the African Youth will lead us in exploring answers to address these challenges within the context of the Africa Agenda 2063-The Africa We want.

Thank you for your attention.