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THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**REMARKS TO 12TH EXTRAORDINARY SESSION OF
THE AFRICAN UNION ON THE AFRICAN
CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA**

Niamey, 7 July 2019

- Your Excellency, Mr. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Chairperson of the African Union;
- Your Excellency, Mr. Mahamadou Issoufou, President of the Republic of Niger and Leader of the African Continental Free Trade Area;
- Your Excellency, Mr. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission;
- Excellencies, Heads of State; Honourable Ministers; African Union Commissioners; Ambassadors;
- Distinguished representatives from the private sector, civil society and the media; Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honour to be here with you to mark the entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the beginning of its transitional phase to full operationalization.

I congratulate all those involved in bringing this historic agreement to fruition, and particularly the African Union Summit Champion for the African Continental Free Trade Area, His Excellency Mr. Mahamadou Issoufou, President of the Republic of Niger and our host here in Niamey, on the banks of the River Niger, itself an important and historical waterway for connecting markets and generating intra-African trade.

I cannot overstate the importance of this Agreement and what has been achieved. Suffice to say that Africa's economic integration was the long-cherished vision of the Organisation of African Unity, the precursor to the African Union.

With the signing of the Agreement by Nigeria and Benin at this Summit, it is deeply gratifying to see that the African Continental Free Trade Area market will bring together almost all African Union member states.

The world's largest free trade area, encompassing 54 countries and 1.2 billion people the African Continental Free Trade Area will bring the promise of trade-led economic growth closer to reality for Africa's entrepreneurs, industrialists, investors, innovators and service suppliers.

It will create jobs and contribute to technology-transfer and the development of new skills; it will improve productive capacity and diversification; and it will increase African and foreign investment.

Perhaps most important of all, the African Continental Free Trade Area demonstrates the common will of African countries to work together to achieve the vision of the Africa Union's Agenda 2063: the Africa We Want.

It is a tool to unleash African innovation, drive growth, transform African economies and contribute to a prosperous, stable and peaceful African continent, as foreseen in both Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We know that some technical details remain to be finalized during this transitional phase up to 1 July 2020.

The United Nations stands ready to work in partnership with African countries as you move to implement the African Continental Free Trade Area.

We are already working with 16 African governments to develop national strategies to maximise the opportunities created by this agreement, and we will increase this number from next year.

We are committed to working with African institutions to mobilize the resources that will be required for full implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area. In the first instance, the African Regional Integration Trust Fund will support countries to mobilize resources to finance regional integration.

We will be working with you to coordinate and leverage complementary funding sources, from the African Development Bank's Africa50 Fund, to the African Union's Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa, and China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Trade can contribute to either widening or closing inclusion and gender gaps, depending on how the process is managed.

So we are also working with governments to counterbalance the distributional and gender-differentiated effects of trade liberalization.

It is essential to act now not only to ensure that women benefit from the African Continental Free Trade Area but also the African youth given the demographic challenges facing the continent.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa is supporting the process of mainstreaming gender and youth employment initiatives into national strategies.

This will help to ensure that trade policy is both gender-sensitive and responds to demographic realities, thereby contributing more fully to sustainable development.

Excellencies, distinguished leaders, ladies and gentlemen,

The entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area is a momentous step – but as you have recognised, it is a first step.

Realizing its full potential will require changes and improvements in several important areas, including infrastructure development, capacity to export, and non-tariff barriers.

Your forward-looking agenda in phase II of the negotiations will tackle competition, investment, and intellectual property rights – just some of the regulatory obstacles that create dysfunction in integrated markets.

I wish you every success in your discussions, and I urge you to move decisively and quickly during the transitional period up to 1 July 2020 to reap the rewards of this historic agreement.

Africans should take particular pride in reaching this agreement at a time of growing protectionism and rising trade tensions that threaten economic stability and progress around the world.

From free trade to climate change and migration, African countries and regional organizations are developing progressive policies that demonstrate global responsibility and forge a new path for multilateralism and sustainability.

The entire United Nations System will continue to support African countries as you accelerate the continent's development. Together, we will realize our shared vision of Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals, leaving no one behind.

I Thank you.

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