

HANDOVER STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 34TH ORDINARY SESSION OF THE
ASSEMBLY OF HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT OF THE
AFRICAN UNION

6 FEBRUARY 2021

Your Excellencies,

We are meeting at an unprecedented moment in the history of the African Union.

Countries and societies around the world have been shaken to their foundations by a deadly and devastating pandemic.

This pandemic has been a stark reminder of both our vulnerability and our interconnectedness as a human race.

It has also demonstrated the value of our Pan-African ideals of unity, solidarity and cooperation to fulfill our common destiny.

Fortified by our unity, we have stepped up to the challenge.

Africa has come into her own, led by this, our African Union.

Today marks the end of South Africa's tenure as Chair of the African Union.

When we assumed the Chairship in February 2020, the world was a different place.

As a continent, we identified several priorities for the year.

We agreed to focus on the promotion of peace and security as part of the effort to Silence the Guns in Africa, to support economic development and integration through the operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, to advance the economic empowerment of women, and to support good governance and democracy.

Yet, within a matter of weeks, the coronavirus pandemic forced us to urgently reprioritise both our programmes of action and the deployment of our resources.

Our most immediate and pressing concern was to manage the impact of the pandemic on our people.

We worked with urgency to develop the Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 and have effectively implemented it through the various structures of the AU.

We have been ably led by the AU Bureau, which has been at the forefront of coordinating responses by member states.

As part of our continental response, the Bureau appointed six prominent and distinguished Africans as Special Envoys to mobilise financial resources to support our national health responses and assist in the recovery of our economies.

These Special Envoys are Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala of Nigeria, Dr Donald Kaberuka of Rwanda, Mr Benkhalfa Abderrahmane of Algeria, Mr Trevor Manuel of South Africa, Mr Tidjane Thiam of Côte d'Ivoire and Professor Mbaya Kankwenda from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The envoys have had extensive engagements with the G20 and multilateral institutions like the World Bank and IMF to mobilise support for middle- and lower-income countries to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic through debt relief, the deferment of debt payments and the provision of new funding,

Thanks to these and other efforts, the IMF and the World Bank have deployed significant financial resources for the COVID-19 response.

Yet our work is not done. Access to concessional finance will remain crucial as countries rebuild their economies.

An injection of fresh resources by the IMF through reallocating and issuing new special drawing rights, with a bias towards the developing world, will correct the glaring inequality in fiscal stimulus measures between advanced economies and the rest of the world.

As the African continent, we established a COVID-19 Response Fund to raise resources for the continental response. Significantly, it was our own Member States that made the first contributions towards the capitalisation of the Fund.

In responding to the pandemic, we have been at the forefront of innovation.

We established the ground-breaking Africa Medical Supplies Platform to assist AU Member States to access affordable medical supplies and equipment.

This effort was led by another Special Envoy, Mr Strive Masiyiwa, who took on the weighty responsibility to coordinate the private sector effort

to procure critical personal protective equipment and other essential supplies to combat COVID-19.

In establishing this platform, we have given practical meaning to the mantra we often repeat, that we are committed to developing African solutions to African problems.

We have harnessed the excellence that exists on our own continent before searching for expertise beyond our shores.

Our response to COVID-19 has been driven, coordinated and capacitated by our own scientists and medical experts, mainly located within the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

And now it is our own African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team that is leading our efforts in the next frontier of the pandemic, to acquire vaccines for the people of Africa.

As we will report later, the Task Team has done outstanding work in both securing substantial quantities of COVID vaccines and mobilising financing so that all African countries can access vaccines for their people.

We have stood firm on principle that the global fight to contain the pandemic must not and cannot leave any country behind.

We have affirmed on all international platforms and in every multilateral engagement that Africa stands as one.

This is a principle on which we have been consistent, not just with regards to equitable access to medical supplies and vaccines, but also

with regards to financial support and debt relief arrangements for vulnerable countries.

Despite the enormous impediments presented by the pandemic, our continent is today firmly on the road to the economic integration.

On the 1st of January 2021, the African Continental Free Trade Area came into operation, realising the vision of the founders of our continental body for economic integration and development.

As we work to rebuild our national economies in the wake of the pandemic, this Continental Free Trade Area will be instrumental in driving trade, investment, job creation and business development on the continent.

It will enable our recovery to be all the faster and stronger.

Ours is an African Union that is practically working towards greater peace and security.

Conflict and war on the continent remains a grave threat to our developmental aspirations.

We know too well that silencing the guns in Africa is a long and arduous process.

We have agreed to extend the implementation of the AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps for Silencing the Guns in Africa for a period of ten years, from 2020 to 2030.

We have further agreed that there must be periodic reviews every two years.

Last year, we began the new Decade for Women's Economic and Financial inclusion, which states our commitment to scale up actions for gender inclusion towards sustainable development.

We said that we would leverage Africa's industrialisation under the African Continental Free Trade Area to advance women's financial and economic inclusion.

During the Extraordinary summit on the AfCFTA held in December 2020, we highlighted the need for trade facilitation to support Africa's business women and entrepreneurs.

Today, we present to member states a Proposed Summit Decision on the Programme of Action on African Women in Trade. This will be underpinned by a Women in Trade Monitoring Platform, which will enable State Parties to annually report on progress being made to strengthen women's participation in the free trade area.

South Africa strongly supports the Women, Gender and Development Directorate of the AU in its call for an action plan to increase women's access to financial services.

This includes tailor-made financial products for women with reliable means to save, access, transfer and borrow money.

As the African Union, we should also develop a Decade Action Plan to help member states determine and implement key flagship activities towards women's economic empowerment.

We all remain concerned at the high levels of violence against women and girls on our continent.

Therefore, we request the Assembly to:

- Adopt a decision to develop a Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls that will amplify our commitment to promote, protect and fulfil women and girls' rights.
- Adopt a decision to convene a women-led Peace Forum attended by Heads of State and Government and to implement the decisions of the Peace and Security Council to institutionalise the Office of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security.
- Adopt a decision to establish a Heads of State Level 'Circle of Champions' that can champion and drive the necessary change.

We also call on Member States to ratify the ILO Convention 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work.

We commend Namibia for leading in this regard.

It is our firm belief that the economic emancipation of women will go a long way in ending the scourge of violence against women and girls on our continent.

The African Union must be unequivocal that all human beings, regardless of sex and gender, are born equal.

At the founding conference of the OAU, one of Africa's most celebrated sons, Kwame Nkrumah, said:

“There is no time to waste. We must unite now or perish...No sporadic act nor pious resolution can resolve our present problems. Nothing will be of avail, except the united act of a united Africa.”

Indeed, there is no time to waste.

If we are to overcome this pandemic and address the challenges that our continent faces, we must forge meaningful partnerships and pursue greater cooperation.

We must continue to implement the institutional reforms necessary for the African Union to become a professional and self-sustaining organisation.

As South Africa hands over the baton to the Democratic Republic of Congo, we are determined to continue working with President Tshisekedi to ensure that Africa becomes an integrated continent that is politically united, based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of African renaissance.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Chair of the African Union Commission, for the manner in which we have worked together during the course of this year; it has both been exemplary and cooperative, members of the AU Bureau, Chairpersons of the Regional Economic Communities, the AU Commission, the Africa CDC as led by Dr John Nkengasong, a shining star and great leader in our fight against COVID-19, the Envoys that we appointed to work with us to address the COVID-19 challenge, as well as the Envoys we appointed to help us with silencing the guns on our continent.

I would like to thank the international community without whose support the Chairship of the AU for 2020 would have been far more

daunting a mission. I want to thank the heads of the various AU institutions, as well as the staff of the AU Commission for all the support that they gave to us during this period.

Your Excellencies, it has been an honour to serve alongside you during this period, and as I hand over to His Excellency President Felix Tshisekedi, I hand over with joy knowing that the work that I took over under President el-Sisi will indeed be continued under the leadership of President Tshisekedi.

I thank you.