

REMARKS BY
H.E. ATO MELES ZENAWI
PRIME MINISTER OF THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA
AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE NEW
AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION CONFERENCE CENTER
AND OFFICE COMPLEX

28 JANUARY 2012

ADDIS ABABA

Excellency Mr. Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, President of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea and Current chairperson of the African Union,

Excellency Mr. Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC),

Excellencies Heads of State and Government,

Excellency Dr. Jean Ping, Chairperson of the African Union Commission,

Invited Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all warmly to Addis Ababa. I am very happy that we can all gather here to inaugurate the new African Union Conference and Office Complex. I wish to extend a special welcome to H.E. Mr. Jia Qinglin, who is here with us today to grace this momentous occasion.

This magnificent edifice is built on the ruins of the oldest maximum security prison in our country. People in Ethiopia used to call that infamous prison Alem Bekagne, loosely translated it means I have given up on this world-this life. This building which will now house the headquarters of our continental organization is built on the ruins of a prison that represented desperation and hopelessness.

The last few decades of the 20th century have not been good for Africa. Largely because of our failures in leadership our economies were in a tail spin for several decades. The limited investments in infrastructure and manufacturing made during the first decades of independence came to a halt or were reversed. In terms of economic development these were the lost decades.

Economic malaise and hopelessness generated senseless violence across the continent and the violence in turn dimmed our hope for social and economic progress. It appeared that we were caught in a vicious circle of violence, poverty and lack of good governance. The fact that we were given medicine for our economic ills that proved to be worse than the disease did not help. It was not a surprise therefore that some people gave up on this Africa just as the prisoners in the prison on whose ruins stands the new headquarter of the African Union had given up on this world –this life.

Quite a few serious academics and pundits in prestigious universities and well known think tanks began to openly suggest that the re-colonization of Africa was the only means of extracting Africa from the vicious circle of poverty and senseless violence. A well known international magazine, the Economist, which espouses the very market fundamentalist ideas that wrecked our economies had a banner headline in one of its issues which simply read Africa: the hopeless continent. Clearly this pundits, experts and international magazines had given up on Africa.

Naturally the people and leadership of Africa could not give up on Africa and did not do so. Far from accepting the re-colonization of our continent as a solution we intensified our struggle to eradicate the last and most pernicious form of colonialism in Africa-the apartheid system in South Africa. In the same year that we witnessed the genocide in Rwanda which exposed to what depths of savagery we are capable of descending, we also witnessed the ultimate and ennobling victory over apartheid and colonialism. We continuously improved our tools to resolve conflicts in our continent culminating in the establishment of the African union and its security infrastructure. We developed the NEPAD plan to regenerate our economies and the peer review mechanism to improve governance and learn from each other's experience. We continued to fight the good fight for the African Renaissance.

As Africa was fighting for its very survival the global environment was changing and changing mostly for the better from our perspective. New poles of growth were emerging across the globe most particularly in Asia with the re-emergence of China and India. As a result, we for the first time in decades begun to have the right to make choices about the path of development we wish to follow. The one party system which was banished in our countries only to be imposed at a continental level by the international financial institutions was crumbling. The global demand for our products and the prices they fetch continued to improve. We began to have access to new sources of technology, investment and finance for our development projects. We seized on these opportunities and built and rebuilt our partnerships.

We are now seeing the results of our struggle for survival. We can now clearly see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Our economies have been growing at a respectable pace for nearly a decade. We have managed to overcome and manage many of the conflicts that ravaged our continent and have overhauled our conflict resolution capacity. Governance is beginning to improve in many of our countries. The African Renaissance that we all dreamed of is beginning to happen. There could be no better proof of this than the fact that the pundits and academics who were publicly advocating for the re-colonization of our continent have now refrained from doing so. The very International magazine that came up with the banner head line "the hopeless continent" about a decade ago has recently come up with a new banner head line that simply read Africa-Rising. Africa is rising indeed. The African renaissance has begun and it is within our means to keep it going. It is within our means to create a new pole of global growth in Africa, to fully stabilize our continent and to make sure that it takes its rights full place in the global scheme of things.

This magnificent new head quarters of our continental organization- the AU which has been at the center of the struggle for the African renaissance is a symbol of the rise of Africa. The façade of this great hall is meant to convey this message of optimism, a message that out of the decades of hopelessness and imprisonment a new era of hope is dawning, and that Africa is being unshackled and freed not only from the remnants of colonialism but also from want and violence. It is very interesting to note, that just as Africa is rising from the ruins of desperation and Afro-pessimism this magnificent new head quarter of the AU is rising from the ruins of a prison of desperation and hopelessness.

China, its amazing re-emergence and its commitments for a win-win partnership with Africa is one of the reasons for the beginning of the African renaissance. Over the past decades China Africa cooperation has gone from strength to strength. The future prospects of our partnership are even brighter. It is therefore very appropriate for China to decide to build this hall-the hall of the rise of Africa-this hall of African renaissance and the adjoining office building for us. I am sure I speak for all of you when I say to the people and government of China thank you so very much. May our partnership continue to prosper.