

Opening statement by African Union Chairperson President Ramaphosa at the 13th Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly on AfCFTA

5 December 2020 - 12:00am



Your Majesties,
Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government,
Your Excellency, Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the AU Commission,
Your Excellencies, Members of the Executive Council,
Mr Wamkele Mene, the Secretary-General of the AfCFTA Secretariat,
Heads of AU Organs,
Heads of Regional Economic Communities,
Deputy Chairperson and Commissioners of the African Union Commission,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to welcome you all to the 13th Extraordinary Session of the Assembly of the Heads of State and Government of the African Union.

Today we stand on the cusp of a new era in the progress of our continent.

The moment that we have all been working painstakingly towards has finally arrived.

With just four weeks to go before the AfCFTA commences trading on the 1st of January 2021, we are here to consider the adoption of the legal instruments that will facilitate its operationalisation.

We are all filled with a great sense of pride at how far we have come to reach this moment.

We recall the collective journey we embarked upon just over four decades ago with the adoption of the Monrovia Strategy in 1979, followed by the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 and the Abuja Treaty in 1991.

We recall with a sense of achievement the subsequent Decisions and Declarations adopted at our previous Summits relating to the economic development and integration of the African continent.

And now, we are about to witness the realisation of one of the flagship projects of Agenda 2063.

Throughout this process, we have stood united, with 55 sovereign AU Member States rallying together, despite different levels of economic development and diverse strategic priorities.

The commencement of trading under the AfCFTA on the 1st of January 2021 is one of the most significant milestones in the continental integration project.

It will be the clearest affirmation yet that Africa is determined to take charge of its own destiny, and that its success and development is fundamentally tied to harnessing the potential and energies of her citizens.

We already witnessed history in the making when the first ever Secretary-General of the AfCFTA Secretariat was installed on the 19th of September 2020 in Accra, Ghana.

We commend His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo and the people of Ghana for their part in fulfilling the African dream.

We also congratulate Mr Wamkele Mene, the Secretary-General of the AfCFTA Secretariat, and wish him success for the work that lies ahead.

The AfCFTA will boost intra-African trade, it will promote industrialisation and competitiveness and contribute to job creation, and it will unleash regional value chains that will facilitate Africa's meaningful integration into the global economy.

The AfCFTA will also improve the prospects of Africa as an attractive investment destination.

In the context of global developments on trade, including threats to multilateral system, the AfCFTA is more critical than ever.

We must use the AfCFTA to advance the empowerment of Africa's women, one of the most important objectives of Agenda 2063.

Improving women's access to trade opportunities not only facilitates economic freedom for women, but also expands the productive capacity of countries.

The AfCFTA must facilitate greater trade opportunities for women, and focus on removing non-tariff barriers to trade.

To support this, we must strengthen women's participation in the continental economy by ensuring there is greater public procurement earmarked for women-owned businesses.

We must ensure that there is sufficient support given to women-owned SMMEs and cooperatives in both local and regional economies.

Most importantly, we should consider an AU Protocol on Women in Trade to give effect to our intentions.

The AfCFTA presents immense opportunities for the private sector in Africa, and will be a catalyst for the development and expansion of private enterprise.

We call on the private sector to be our partners in this journey and provide support to this continental effort through the development of human and financial resources and investment in infrastructure and technology.

Before I conclude, let me acknowledge and appreciate the critical role played by the Heads of State and Government and for their continued support towards the realisation of this flagship project.

We express our appreciation to H.E. Issoufou Mahamadou, the President of the Republic of Niger and the Champion of the AfCFTA, for his excellent work and the dedicated leadership he has demonstrated throughout the negotiation process of the AfCFTA since March 2016 to date.

We further extend our gratitude to the Chairperson of the Commission, H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, all the Commissioners and staff of the AU Commission for their tireless efforts and dedication, as well as the technical support from partners such as the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

The AfCFTA is the great edifice that holds our collective dreams and aspirations for an integrated and prosperous continent.

It has been us, the nations of Africa, who laboured and toiled to lay the weighty cornerstone, dig the foundations and erect the scaffolding.

And it has been you, Your Excellencies, who have been the engineers who have kept a watchful eye to ensure that as the building grows upwards, that it remains firm.

There is no doubt that the AfCFTA will endure for it is built upon the strongest of foundations – the unity of our nations.

May it continue to be strengthened, may it weather the elements and may it forever hold.

I now declare this 13th Extraordinary Session of the Assembly of the Heads of State and Government of the African Union on the African Continental Free Trade Area officially open.

I thank you.