



**STATEMENT OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION CHAIRPERSON,
MOUSSA FAKI MAHAMAT**

**OPENING SESSION
18th EXTRAORDINARY SESSION OF THE
EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
KIGALI CONVENTION CENTRE
19 March 2018**

Madame Chairperson of the Executive Council,

Honourable Ministers,

**Distinguished Representatives of the Regional Economic Communities and the
Organs of the Union,**

Dear Partners,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I first of all, on behalf of the African Union Commission, express to the Government and the people of Rwanda our deep gratitude for the excellent organisation of our meeting.

I am touched by the innumerable expressions of hospitality shown to my colleagues and me since our arrival in Kigali.

I wish also to express my grateful thanks to the Ministers of Trade of all our Member States, the negotiators and experts who worked tirelessly for the conclusion of the project of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

We take great pride in their efforts and commitment. Your work will, without doubt, amplify and consolidate the results obtained by them.

In the constellation of actors whose commitment led to the progress made, the efforts of the members of the Permanent Representatives Committee deserve to be noted.

They have, collectively and individually, given the best of themselves. I am grateful to them.

Their unity, efficiency and sense of responsibility made it possible, in perfect coordination with the Commission, the Department of Trade and Industry in particular, to bring coherence in the valuable and diverse contributions.

As a matter of fact, the efforts of all could be pooled in a beautiful Pan-Africanist drive.

The results are there and speak for themselves.

The reports that will be presented to you will bear eloquent testimony.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since the launching of the institutional reform process of the African Union, in July 2016, which aims at placing our tool at the level of our ambitions as stipulated in the Agenda 2063, we have fully stepped into a dynamic of accelerating the continental integration action.

The Continental African Free Trade Area, the Single African Air Transport Market and the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the African Passport, as well as the major regional and continental infrastructure projects, as stated in the Programme of Infrastructure Development in Africa, are the pillars of this enterprise.

Everything has been said about the Free Trade Area: its crucial function in African integration, its economic spill over effect, the solidarity, of which it is the symbol against other blocs in a world where competition is fierce, its positive impact on the well-being of our peoples, the expected opening up of immense sources of jobs and the encouraging development prospects it offers to our youths.

The numbers speak for themselves. The establishment of the Free Trade Area will result in the establishment of a market of over one billion two hundred million people, with a combined gross product of over three trillion Dollars.

It will induce an increase in intra-African trade of 52 per cent by 2022. Our industrial and agricultural exports will increase significantly.

The potentialities with which our continent is endowed will finally benefit our peoples, who are desperately waiting for their lives to improve tangibly and substantially.

These are just so many dividends expected from the crucial stage that the Extraordinary summit of Kigali should take us through.

The international context, marked by a worrisome weakening of multilateralism and the principles of solidarity among peoples in the name of our common humanity, make the execution of this flagship project crucial.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From then on, one question, only one, arises in our face: can we dash and disappoint so many expectations?

Can we accept to take the risk, collectively or individually, of postponing the execution of this major strategic project?

At a time when the rest of the world is coming together and consolidating itself in the resolute defence of its strategic interests, we have no choice but to forge ahead.

We must overcome our fears, our national constraints, however legitimate they may be and the barriers that may arise from overly restrictive interpretations of our sovereignty.

We must project to the face of the world the image of a united Africa.

Indeed, some technical issues remain to be overcome. They relate in particular to the nature of the Secretariat of the Free Trade Area, the number of ratifications required for the entry into force of the Agreement and the admissibility of reservations.

But these considerations should not make us lose sight of the objective to be attained. More especially as on most of these issues we have a practice and a doctrine which are almost consistent.

Africa is waiting for us. Its youths, rightly impatient, call with all their strength for concrete answers to his anguish and agonies.

Our friends around the world cross their fingers for fear of our slip ups.

Conversely, our opponents and competitors revel in the idea of yet another postponement, heralding the hypothetical failure.

One decision, only one, will give relief to our peoples and strengthen our friends: sign in large numbers, ratify urgently and scrupulously implement the Free Trade Area Agreement.

We must declare, in front of our peoples and to the whole world, the definitive departure of the high-speed train of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

This approach must go hand in hand with more sustained action to hasten the effective implementation of the Single African Air Transport Market, as well as the signing and ratification of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the African Passport.

I call upon all the Member States to shoulder their responsibilities in this respect.

Consequently, the States that have not yet joined the Single Air Transport Market should do so without further delay.

I call upon all our States to take the necessary measures to become parties to the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the African Passport.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another important task ahead of us is the adoption of a common position on the successor arrangements to the Cotonou Agreements. These expire in 2020.

These negotiations take place in a particular context for the continent. On the one hand, Africa has adopted, through Agenda 2063, a long-term vision for the transformation and socio-economic development of the continent. On the other, we aspire to speak with one voice in our dialogue with our partners, to ensure that our concerns and the effective defence of our interests are taken into account.

In this exercise, the formulation of our common position must certainly take into account regional and national concerns, which are otherwise understandable, given the diversity of the legal status binding some of our Member States to the European Union.

However, this position must be developed within the respect of the aspirations contained in the Agenda 2063, the unity of the continent and the building of a relationship of equals with Europe.

In short, in the forthcoming negotiations, we must prove our ability to act as a united bloc in defending the interests of our continent.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are on the eve of a historic decision in all respects. It demands from all of us a renewed commitment to the service of the peoples of our continent.

I invite you to use your intelligence, your talents and to mobilise all your intellectual, political and diplomatic resources so that the huge result expected from this meeting is achieved.

When our Heads of State and Government will meet here, the day after tomorrow, for this cause, their meeting must be crowned with great and brilliant success.

Do we have the right not to offer them this beautiful gift for which they worked so hard and about which our Founding Fathers dreamt so much?

Some may say that I am exaggeratingly passionate about the subject. Do not blame them because they are right. As a famous philosopher rightly pointed out, "Nothing great is accomplished without passion".

I invite you in all brotherhood to join hands in passion, to launch and establish the Free Trade Area, a prelude to a great, competitive, fruitful, vibrant and prosperous continental market.

I wish you full success to your deliberations and thank you for your attention.