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**10TH EXTRAORDINARY SESSION OF
THE ASSEMBLY OF THE UNION ON THE
AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA**

**KIGALI, RWANDA
21 MARCH 2018**

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

Excellency President Paul Kagame, Current Chairman of the African Union,

Excellencies Heads of State and Government and other Heads of Delegation,

Representatives of the Regional Economic Communities, the Organs of the Union, the African private sector and civil society,

Representatives of partner institutions and countries,

Ladies and gentlemen

This is a historic day.

After Addis Ababa in May 1963, Abuja in June 1991 and Durban in July 2002, Kigali, in this month of March, marks a new step in our march towards greater integration and closer unity.

I would like therefore to express my high and deep appreciation to all the Heads of State and Government, as well as to the other heads of delegation, present here.

By travelling to Kigali, they responded to the call of duty. At this juncture in our history, there can be no bigger task for Africa than the deepening of the integration of the continent.

May I express, on your behalf, our grateful thanks to our hosts. To President Paul Kagame, who leads our Union with dynamism and dedication, to his Government and to the Rwandese people, I say Murakoze! We are grateful for the warmth of your welcome and the excellent organisational facilities provided for our meeting.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We have come here to fulfil the aspiration of our peoples for integration and unity.

We have come here to lay a new milestone, to take another step in the Pan-African journey, whose intellectual seeds were sown more than a century ago.

We have come here driven by the conviction that integration is not an option, but an imperative. To paraphrase Emperor Haile Selassie at the May 1963 Summit, the giant Africa cannot wake up if it remains divided.

The world is changing, and changing at a great speed. International competition is fierce. It leaves no room for the weak.

These last few months have, indeed, demonstrated the urgency of hastening the pace.

Europe is endeavouring to deepen its integration, despite the challenges inherent in such an undertaking.

In the Pacific area, a new entity - the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership - has just emerged.

China has launched a major undertaking - the One Belt One Road Initiative.

For Africa, after decades of independence, marked by persistent under-development and a marginal place in the international system, the terms of the debate are laid down in almost Manichean terms: Unite or Perish, as Kwame Nkrumah said at the Addis Ababa founding Summit.

Economic integration thus responds not only to aspirations born out of Pan-Africanism, but also to a practical imperative linked to the economic viability of the continent.

Consequently, the convening of this extraordinary session of the Assembly has raised great expectations across the continent. Our peoples, our business community and our youth, in particular, cannot wait any longer to see the lifting of the barriers that divide our continent, hinder its economic take-off and perpetuate misery, even though Africa is abundantly endowed with wealth.

Outside the continent, our efforts are observed with a mixture of admiration and scepticism.

Admiration for the speed with which our experts and Ministers of Trade negotiated the basic texts establishing the Free Trade Area.

Scepticism, because some actors, but also our own peoples, have seen so many proclamations remain a dead letter, so many commitments without practical execution that they have come to doubt the strength of our commitment.

This Summit must, therefore, mark a break. It must strengthen the confidence of our peoples in their Union and its ability to fulfil their aspirations. It must confound those who, outside Africa, continue to think, with barely concealed condescension, that our decisions will never materialise.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The Free Trade Area is the product of a little more than two years of negotiations, coordinated by Egypt then of Nigeria and under the overall auspices of President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger.

This is an opportunity for me to pay tribute to President Issoufou and the African Trade Ministers, as well as to our Regional Economic Communities, for the dedication with which they led this process.

I also thank the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the African Development Bank, for their accompaniment and support.

It is obvious that in a process as complicated as this one, compromise is a principle with which everyone must be imbued.

Beyond the debates about what some countries might gain or lose in the short term, the truth, statistically established, is that each of our Member States and the continent as a whole will benefit immensely from the establishment of the Free Trade Area.

In May 1963, the Late Ahmed Ben Bella had urged his colleagues to die a little, if not totally, for the liberation of Africa. Today, we must all be inspired by a similar spirit of sacrifice for the sake of the integration of the continent.

The time is no longer for hesitation. I, therefore, call upon all the Member States to sign and ratify the Free Trade Area Agreement. Our ambition must be to ensure its entry into force before the end of this year.

For my part, I intend, in the next few weeks, to appoint emissaries to carry out, under the authority of President Issoufou and in coordination with the private sector, the required outreach towards all concerned stakeholders.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I would like to take this opportunity to stress once again the importance of other aspects of the integration of the continent.

In addition to the Free Trade Area Agreement, the Commission is submitting to your attention the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the African Passport. I urge all Member States to sign this instrument. We should ensure that Africans are no longer treated like foreigners on their own continent, while others move about therein often freely.

Another important component of our agenda is the Single African Air Transport Market. I solemnly appeal to the countries that have not yet done so to join this initiative.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Africa today has the opportunity to transform its potential into reality and translate into deeds the aspirations contained in Agenda 2063. This opportunity must be seized.

In truth, it is a privilege for you, for all of us, to lay down this important milestone in the integration of the continent.

On this day, the Founding Fathers our Union, in their eternal sleep, are inviting us, should I say conjuring us, to make this Summit a resounding success.

In May 1963, in a much less favourable context, they made history by laying the foundations for the institutional Pan-Africanism of which the African Union is the proud heir. We cannot do less than them.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me conclude by borrowing some words from Kwame Nkrumah's speech to the Ghanaian National Assembly in June 1965:

« The task ahead is great indeed, and heavy is the responsibility; and yet it is a noble and glorious challenge - a challenge which calls for the courage to believe, the courage to dare, the courage to do, the courage to fight, the courage to achieve - to achieve the highest excellencies and the fullest greatness of man. Dare we ask for more in life ».

This address has particular resonance as we gather here in Kigali. We need to summon the required political will for the African Continental Free Trade Area to finally become a reality.

I thank you.