

Address at the opening ceremony of the African Union Ministers responsible for Air Transport and Aviation

Sun City, 18 May 2005

Honourable Minister of Transport, Jeff Radebe,
Honourable Ministers Responsible for Air Transport and Aviation,
Commissioner in Charge of Infrastructure and Energy of the African Union, Bernard Zoba,
President of AFCAC, Tshepo Peege,
Executives of African Airlines,
Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

I am very pleased to address this esteemed gathering of African Union Ministers responsible for Air Transport and Aviation. I extend a very warm welcome to all of you and trust that this meeting will afford all members of the African Union the opportunity once again to discuss a wide-range of issues, some admittedly seemingly intractable, in accordance with the express mandate of the African Union Heads of State meeting.

Some time ago the African Union itself decided that a continent-wide efficient, effective, and cheaper aviation and air transport system must be counted as one of the critical success factors behind the African Union itself and of NEPAD, in particular.

It does not take rocket science to understand the centrality of air transport to the ability of the continent's leadership to communicate effectively when we remember that the vast majority of the delegates and Ministers attending this summit took to the skies to get here. And I hazard to suggest that some of your trips were easier to arrange than others!

In earlier times, eighty years ago, the Congolese marvelled at the hydro-planes connecting several cities on the Congo River. In the same year of 1925, a Handley Page trip from Belgium to its colony, Congo, took 51 days for a total of 75 hours and 25 minutes flight.

These days, private charter jets and government jets transport the elite effortlessly across the continent in less than a day. We have come a long way indeed since 1911 with the early experimental and war-time flights.

We should not paint such a rosy picture of aviation in Africa as it is self-evident that we need a comprehensive and concrete programme of action for aviation, in line with the NEPAD programme and the Millennium Development Goals.

The parlous state of affairs of the aviation industry leaves a lot to be desired. Airlines are often unreliable with frequent cancellations, which are not only inconvenient but also unproductive for our economic growth.

If we are to accept IATA's statistics (as Africa's are non-existent), then we should be mindful of the potential of the aviation industry to stimulate economic growth. IATA's statistics reveal that airlines alone bring to the global economy approximately four million direct jobs with US\$400 billion in output; 24 million related jobs or US\$1.4 trillion; and in total 4.5% of global GNP.

(extracted from website: www.iata.org)

In his speech to the AirFinance Conference in New York on 4 April 2005, the Director General and CEO of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), Giovanni Bisignani, observes that the airline industry has lost its balance. Indeed, he says that high fuel and labour costs as well as the unfair monopoly given by governments to airports and air navigations service providers costs airlines an annual bill of US\$40 billion.

In short, he argues that governments must ensure cost-efficient infrastructure so that the global economy does not continue to see record profits at airports and yet record losses by airlines.

This Summit of Ministers responsible for aviation and air transport matters on our continent convenes at an important time for Africa. We are beginning to see major interest in practical programmes of development assistance from the developed world. At the same time, preparations are now underway for an event of major importance to us all, the success of Africa's first-ever opportunity to host the FIFA World Cup Soccer tournament.

If we are to give this event the distinctive African flavour we have promised, we have to make sure that Africa is well represented on the field as well as on the stands of the stadiums where the games will be played. For that to happen, we need easy air access, cheaper fares, as little regulation as possible and a well-oiled structure of alliances and partnerships between the airlines of our continent.

I understand that your agenda covers a number of critical items, including an assessment of why it is taking so long to implement the Yamassoukro Decision of 1999, which as we all know, was based on the 1988 Declaration of the same name. I need not remind Ministers that the African Union Heads of State have already remarked that we need to accelerate efforts to implement Yamassoukro.

We are conscious of the range of concerns that a number of countries may have with a rapid implementation of the Decision. We urge all of you to weigh these concerns against the wider range of benefits that the continent and regions as a whole can derive from a balanced implementation of the Decision according to practical timeframes.

It is your task as the Ministers responsible for aviation to take into account the degree to which the diverse experience of air transport across the continent has on domestic airlines and airports, on regional economies, continental growth and interaction with countries beyond our shores.

At the same time, I suggest that the Heads of State of the AU will look forward to receiving practical, time-bound recommendations that will enhance our ability as a continent to interact

with each other, to reduce fares and to co-ordinate schedules better. These are, after all, at the centre of our concerns.

At the same time though, Yamassoukro provides a framework within which a range of other, complementary actions need to be adopted, if we are to take African aviation into the new millennium as a centrepiece of African development generally.

I am concerned that a recent analysis of global airliner accident statistics for 2004 found that although it was an "extremely safe year, there is reason for concern in Africa". It is alarming that, although the continent accounts for about 3% of world aircraft departures, Africa witnesses 27% of all fatal accidents on its soil.

I am aware that we have committed ourselves to reduce the accident rate by 50% by 2015, but this requires steadfast decisions in the areas of upper airspace management, maintenance and operations on the ground, the phasing out of certain types of ageing aircraft, probably mostly in the cargo and air freighter categories, improving air traffic navigation infrastructure and services, and so on.

International organisations like ICAO and IATA likewise require that we react as member states to a number of international initiatives around safety in the air and security in the aviation sector generally. Let us not forget that many years before September 11, Africa was a victim of air terrorism when a passenger airliner was blown out of West African skies by saboteurs. There are many other tragic examples of loss of life through plane crashes.

And yet, we have not done enough on our own to protect ourselves in this regard. At the same time, though, we should be conscious that not one size fits all. Indeed, we would be better placed to seek Africa-wide consensus on a number of issues that we could present to global bodies.

Another consideration that you will need to look at is what we need to do about environmental issues. We should do what we can to reduce the emission of noxious gas and noise pollution.

We would urge greater appreciation of this problem, including the perspective that challenges the practice of African countries importing second-hand, older generation aircraft to boost their air transport capacity. Yet, we find that the same aircraft are banned from European or American airspace for environmental reasons. What sometimes looks like a solution may, in fact, turn into somewhat of a trap.

But of critical importance to us all, is the ability of Africa's own institutions to build the necessary capacity and respect due to them so that they can fulfil their functions adequately. In this regard, the financial well-being of AFCAC is a prerequisite for its administrative and operational health.

After all, this is the body charged by the AU to be the custodian of Africa's civil aviation environment and requires the active and financial support of its members. There are considerable pressures on some member states that have supported this body. We would appreciate it if

recommendations could also be made at some time about how to strengthen AFCAC for the benefit of us all.

Too often people think of aviation matters as pertaining solely to the air, the domain of birds and aircraft! We will do ourselves a disservice if we do not look into infrastructure requirements on the ground.

The provision of transport infrastructure generally is very diverse on our continent, with road, rail, maritime and river dimensions taking different shapes according to geography, climate and so on. Air transport infrastructure is likewise dispersed across the continent in different concentrations.

But it is central to our ability to open up areas bedevilled by former conflict, to integrating forest areas or isolated rural regions with mainstream economic hubs, or even allowing more of our people to travel to and from their home areas.

Africa has over 4000 airports of one kind or another, but a large number of these are not designed or suitable for modern jet aircraft. Even cargo capacity is restrained in many instances by the inadequate operations on the ground.

On the whole, we expect this Summit to deliberate in a constructive and practical manner around these issues of the faster implementation of Yamassoukro and of developing an Africa-wide consensus on issues affecting air safety, security and environment, and, of course, of strengthening our institutional ability to accomplish all of these things.

We need to see proposals based on a Programme of Action that will respond to the NEPAD objectives, helping us to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Our African aviation and air transport sector must not simply reach for the sky but must also connect small villages to the global market.

In this way, each and every one of us will make a significant contribution to the re-birth and prosperity of our continent to make this truly a better world for all who live in it. I wish you well in your deliberations.

Thank you.