

Address at the 38th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association - Africa Region Conference

27 July 2007

Programme Director,
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association,
Presiding Officers of the South African Parliament,
Commonwealth Parliamentarians,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

I had wished to be with you at the beginning of this important conference. However, owing to unavoidable government commitments, I was unfortunately unable to come when you began your work. I trust that you have had very fruitful deliberations on the various topics reflected on the week-long programme of your conference.

If a question was put to all of us gathered here in Cape Town under the umbrella of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, as to: What gives us our shared commonality, what would our answer be?

Would the answer be that we are a commonwealth because we speak the same language as that of our erstwhile coloniser? Or is it that we are a commonwealth because we share a common and unique destiny?

I think we would agree that fora such as this one provide us with the opportunity to address such important questions even though the particular question I posed was only inspired by my recollection of an African saying that - the name we carry is either a blessing or a curse.

But of course, more significant than any label by which we identify ourselves, is what we can and should do to respond to the pressing and immediate reality of a shared African heritage of poverty and underdevelopment, and a shared African heritage of a common resolve to act together to place ourselves on the high road to success.

It is fitting, Chairperson, that the 38th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association-Africa Region Conference (CPA) has assembled in Cape Town under the broad theme of "Parliamentarians building strong democratic institutions for promoting development in the 21st Century". This theme focuses our attention on the task we set ourselves when we, as Africans, declared the 21st Century, an African Century.

When we made this declaration, we knew that Africa's all-round advance and its recovery from centuries of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid and neo-colonialism would, among other things, intrinsically be linked to its realisation of the goals of peace, democracy, prosperity and unity.

As we strive to accomplish these goals, we must be inspired by the understanding that it is only when the masses of the people repossess the right to be their own liberators that we will release the immense energy that resides among these masses, which our Continent sorely needs rapidly to advance towards the realisation of the goal of the emancipation of all Africans from the curse of poverty, underdevelopment, and global marginalisation.

To create the possibility for the masses of our people to discharge their historic mission as their own liberators means transforming our Continent into a home of democracy and entrenched democratic practice. I am honoured that you gave me the possibility, this morning, perhaps belatedly to welcome you to our country as democrats, the elected tribunes of the African masses.

I welcome you to our young democracy as comrades-in-arms engaged in a common struggle to ensure that our Continent should never again allow that the masses of our people are deprived of their right to determine their destiny by people who impose themselves on the masses as rulers, simply because they have the capacity to proclaim themselves our masters by virtue of the fact that they carry weapons of death in their hands.

I must confess that I say all this to bind all of us to a common compact that obliges all of us constantly and everyday to strive for the realisation of the goal that – the people shall govern!

I am certain that together we share the understanding that only through a democratic system of governance can the masses of the African people acquire the space to give let to their extraordinary talents, to give free reign to their ingenuity and creativity in an environment liberated from the choking fetters of oppressive, autocratic and dictatorial government systems.

It is fitting that you, African Parliamentarians, who have gathered here, have discussed the important topics that appear on your agenda. Among these is the issue that is central to all of us as Africans – the fight against poverty and underdevelopment – and the role that our Parliaments should play in this regard.

Indeed, the struggle to combat underdevelopment and push back the frontiers of poverty on our Continent demands the collective effort not only of Africans, but also determined engagement with the African Diaspora, South-South partnerships, and partnerships of equals with the countries of the North.

I am informed that quite correctly, you have also discussed the important issue of the environment and the role that our Parliaments should play to ensure that our Continent and all our people respond in a timely and correct manner to the critical matter of environmental protection, which is an important subject not just for Africa, but also for all humanity.

It is now universally accepted that the consequences of global warming will be especially severe for the developing countries, and particularly our Continent. The severity of this impact will derive precisely from the fact that because we are poor, we do not have the means to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change. Despite the objective reality that we would have contributed very little to such climate change, we would nevertheless be condemned to bear the brunt of environmental degradation in all its manifestations, including desertification.

To bring all this close to our lived experience, we all know that it is the poor who inhabit the informal settlements in our towns, cities and villages that are often built in marginal areas such as natural fault lines, floodplains and unstable hillsides. This renders such communities especially vulnerable to floods, landslides and other natural disasters.

Chairperson:

As we all know, after the wave of independence, mainly in the 1960s, a combination of factors that brought about numerous crises in our countries ensured that our continent was placed under de facto trusteeship, with programmes and policies for Africa's development drawn-up by people who were not only not African, but were, in many instances, those who had been our colonial masters.

To defeat this neo-colonial stranglehold, we have developed our own path of development, as reflected in the Constitutive Act authorising the establishment of the African Union, and the AU development and reconstruction programme, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

These African creations represent formidable instruments to address the important matters that you as African Commonwealth Parliamentarians have discussed during the course of this week.

I am certain that at previous meetings you have discussed both the Constitutive Act and the African Union. I am not convinced that together, we have fully understood the true meaning of the Constitutive Act, which had to be, and was approved by our national parliaments. As you know, this means that it therefore enjoys the status of municipal law in each of our countries, equal in importance to all other laws approved by our Parliaments.

This must surely mean that your oversight function as Parliamentarians includes oversight over the implementation of the Constitutive Act. I am not certain that even our own Parliament has seen it as its task to honour this obligation.

In addition to this, all our Parliaments are represented in the Pan African Parliament. Obviously, the PAP, itself a child of the Constitutive Act, cannot ignore its responsibility to act vigorously to ensure that all our countries respect all the injunctions contained in the Constitutive Act, which have the force of law in each of our countries.

I am certain that you have understood that all I am trying to do is to encourage you as an African Association of Parliamentarians to take most seriously your responsibility as elected leaders of our people to ensure the success of the African Union in all its elements, including the institutions that have already been established, such as the Pan African Parliament, the Court of Human and Peoples Rights, the Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the ECOSSOC.

This should include assistance to all our countries to respect the prescriptions of the Constitutive Act and support for all the countries that have acceded to the African Peer Review Mechanism to meet the benchmarks of good governance set by the APRM, which serves as an instrument for the implementation of the objectives set by the Constitutive Act.

Everything I have said makes the statement that it is obvious that we have a lot of work ahead of us. If I may give you yet another example, let me refer to the fact you are aware of, that all of us are obliged to take action to implement the provisions of the African Convention on Terrorism.

I am convinced that not all our countries have passed the necessary legislation to make the Convention on Terrorism operational. This Association could work with the Pan African Parliament to prepare model legislation on Terrorism to be made available to all African Parliaments, which would help to ensure that all our countries have compatible legislation that brings the African Convention on Terrorism into force in all our countries.

This would enormously strengthen the capacity of our Continent to defeat the threat of terrorism which has already claimed many African lives. I am certain that you, Honourable Parliamentarians, would be aware of other interventions of a similar kind that you can make. These might include such important matters as confronting the mercenary scourge, human and drug trafficking, gender equality and children's rights.

As part of the many on-going programmes of NEPAD, one of the most recent areas of progress that deserves special mention is the birth of the Pan-African Infrastructure Development Fund, which was launched in Accra during the 9th Ordinary Summit Meeting of the African Union (AU) earlier this month.

The Pan-African Infrastructure Development Fund has been established to finance large-scale African infrastructure development projects. Of critical and historic importance is the fact that the entirety of the capital of the Fund, currently amounting to US \$625-million, originates exclusively from within our Continent.

We are confident that within the next 12 months the capital base of the Pan-African Infrastructure Development Fund will reach US \$1 billion. Practically, we, as Africans, are making the firm statement

that we are ready to rely on our resources to finance our own development, focusing in the first instance on the critically important infrastructure projects already elaborated by NEPAD.

Further, the introduction of the African Peer Review Mechanism, as part of NEPAD, and its acceptance by many member states of the African Union have already begun to make an important contribution to our efforts to sustain and entrench good political, economic and corporate governance on our Continent, and strengthen the bonds of solidarity and mutual support among our countries.

I am certain that you, as African Parliamentarians have an important role to play to ensure the success of the NEPAD programmes. Not least among these is educating the masses of our people about what NEPAD is and mobilising them to engage in the development process. I would like to suggest that if this has not been done already, this Association should establish direct contact with the NEPAD Secretariat to facilitate its systematic engagement with the NEPAD programmes.

Chairperson,

As we are aware, the AU held its 9th Ordinary Summit Meeting in Accra, Ghana from 1 to 3 July 2007. The principal aim of the Summit was to provide an opportunity to the African leaders to engage in what had been described as a "Grand Debate on the African Union Government", as well as celebrate the historic 50th Anniversary of the independence of the sister country of Ghana.

As you know, the Summit Meeting concluded with the adoption of the Accra Declaration, which outlined the continental programme of action on the question of a Union Government. In essence, the Accra Declaration is a collective decision of the African political leaders on how to proceed with the question of African integration. It is therefore important to reflect briefly on this matter.

To provide the context within which the Grand Debate took place in Accra, I would like to draw from an article that I wrote three weeks ago on this matter. In that article, in part, I said, "the Grand Debate centred on one critical strategic question. This was – should we adopt a top-down approach to the formation of the United States of Africa, with its Union Government, or should we follow the bottom-up route! Should we set up a Union Government to lead this process or should we use our existing structures, especially the Regional Economic Communities and the African Union to effect the process of integration that would lead to the formation of a Union Government serving as the Executive Authority of the United States of Africa!"

I further noted that "the Accra Summit Meeting decided unanimously in favour of the latter option, of building the House of Africa from its foundation upwards, "constructing one floor at a time", as Uganda President, Yoweri Museveni, put it.

Lastly, I observed that "representing the united view of the region of Southern Africa, the current Chairperson of SADC, Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili of Lesotho, said: "We recognise that Africa"s interests would be best served through both political and economic integration. However, we must adopt a bottom-up approach, not a top-down one. The entire process must be people-driven and not leaders-driven. It must be the voice of the masses that determine Africa"s ultimate destiny."

Indeed, the Accra Declaration stated that the African leaders who gathered in Ghana agreed to accelerate the economic and political integration of the African Continent, including the formation of a Union Government for Africa, with the ultimate objective of creating the United States of Africa. However, in order to realise this objective, the African leaders agreed on the necessary steps that must be taken, which include:

- The rationalisation, strengthening and harmonisation of the activities of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in line with previous decisions of the AU, with the RECs mandated also to

work for regional political integration, with these acting as binding blocks in the advance towards the creation of the United States of Africa;

- The conduct of an audit of the Executive Council, the AU Commission, as well as the other organs of the AU, in terms of Article 10 of the Constitutive Act;
- The establishment of a Ministerial Committee that will examine a number of matters, including the identification of the possible mandate of the Union Government and its relations with national governments; identification of domains of competence and thmpact of the establishment of the Union Government on the sovereignty of Member States; and the determination of the relationship between the Union Government and the RECs.

Indicating the seriousness with which our Continent views the imperative to accelerate its advance towards its unity, the next Ordinary Session of the AU, next January, will consider a report on the implementation of the Accra Declaration.

A significant assertion made by the Accra Declaration is the obligation to involve the African masses in the process leading up to the creation of a Union Government. Accordingly, the Declaration stated that the Heads of States and Government of the AU “agree on the importance of involving the African peoples, including Africans in the Diaspora, in the process leading to the formation of the Union Government”.

The reasoning of the African Heads of State and Government was that the involvement of the African peoples is necessary “in order to ensure that the African Union is a Union of peoples and not just a “Union of States and Governments”.

The challenge that faces African Parliaments is how to seize the moment created by the debate from the recently concluded Accra Summit Meeting of the AU. The voice of the African masses must be heard in the on-going process to strengthen African cooperation and unity.

Clearly, if our Parliamentarians, such as yourselves, fail to make their voices heard by participating in the processes that were identified by the AU Summit Meeting, a critically important African constituency would be left out of an historic process to translate into reality the age-old African dream of African unity. In this regard, you, our Parliamentarians, elected representatives of the African masses, have to ensure that the people fully play their role as makers of history.

Chairperson,

A new spirit is abroad on our Continent. I have felt its palpable presence personally, in many countries of our Continent and in all our regions. In a few days I will have the privilege to join President Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire and Prime Minister Guillaume Soro, as well as other African Heads of State in an important ceremony in Côte d'Ivoire to ignite a Flame of Peace signalling the return of peace to this important African country.

That Ivorian Flame of Peace will, at the same time, serve as a symbol of the determination of the African masses, truly the wretched of the earth, to free themselves from all the evil spirits that have had a free run over the face of our Continent for far too long, stripping us of our dignity and imposing on us the humiliating condition that many in the rest of the world have come to treat us as being nothing more than mere objects of charitable kindness.

A new spirit is abroad on our Continent. The great African masses are saying – enough is enough! All of us are privileged that we live during this new age of the Renaissance of Africa. We are privileged that we can take action as African patriots and register new African victories that will bring joy and constitute our sacred memorial prayer of tribute to our great heroes wherever they are – Mohamed V, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Abdel Gamel Nasser, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Modibo Keita, Eric Williams, Martin Luther King Jnr, Malcolm X, Murtala Mohamed, Seretse Khama, Albert Mvumbi Luthuli and Oliver Tambo.

The lyrics of one of our liberation songs, which young female and male combatants of our movement sang during the years when we had to take up arms to secure our freedom, asked the question – when the roll call of heroes and heroines is read, will my name also be mentioned! – ma ebizwa amagam' amaqhawe, ngob'elami ngolifika likhona!

I believe that all of us present here today, leaders elected by the new African masses, must ask ourselves the same question – when these masses read out the roll call of their contemporary heroines and heroes, will our own names be worthy of mention!

The answer to that question rests entirely in our hands. I am certain that if singly and collectively we make the pledge – we serve the people of Africa! – and honour this pledge, the masses of our people will invoke the blessings of the ancestors as they bestow on us the eminent title of hero and heroine.

A new and indestructible spirit of dedication to progressive and people-centred change is abroad in Africa. The only question that remains to be answered is whether we, whom the African masses accept as their leaders, are ready and willing to play our part as midwives of the new Africa that is striving to be born!

In the name of the African masses, including those in the African Diaspora, I am privileged to wish you, who represent the African contingent of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, success in all your future endeavours.

Thank you.