

Statement at the official opening of the 1st extraordinary assembly of heads of state and government of the African Union

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 3 February 2003

Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government;
Your Excellency, Mr Amara Essy, Interim Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union;
Honourable Ministers and Ambassadors;
Distinguished Delegates;
Invited Guests;
Members of the Press:

I am honoured to welcome you to this 1st Extraordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union. I would also like to thank Your Excellencies for the effort you made to attend this important meeting.

We must also take this opportunity to convey our condolences and solidarity to Their Excellencies, Presidents Robert Mugabe and Olusegun Obasanjo who are dealing currently with deaths and injury resulting from a train accident and an explosion at an apartment building respectively.

Similarly, we express our condolences to President George Bush of the United States for the tragic loss of human lives as a result of break up of the space shuttle.

The Assembly will recall that among others, the Durban Inaugural Summit last July decided that we should convene this session to consider any proposed amendments to the Constitutive Act of the African Union.

It was suggested then that there was need to amend this Act so as to improve the functioning and effectiveness of our Organization. Member States did, indeed, submit proposals directed towards this end.

As stipulated in our Rules of Procedure, the Executive Council has met to consider these amendments and will accordingly make its recommendations to the Assembly. In this regard, I would like to convey the sincere thanks of the Assembly to the Ministers who approached their work with the necessary seriousness and unity of purpose. This should greatly facilitate the proceedings of the Assembly, convened to consider only the matter of the proposed amendments to the Constitutive Act.

The six months since the formation of the African Union have underlined the correctness of the concern expressed by the Assembly at its inaugural session that we must ensure that the Union is structured in a manner that will ensure that it is able effectively to pursue the high objectives set out by the Constitutive Act and other important decisions of the Assembly and the other constitutional organs of the Union.

In particular, we continue to be confronted by the challenge of peace and stability on our continent. Events in this regard have emphasised the need for us urgently to constitute the Peace and Security Council on which we have already decided. All of us are convinced that this will help us to respond more effectively to the imperative to move the entirety of our continent to a situation of peace and enhanced safety and security for all our peoples.

In this regard, I would like to draw the attention of the Assembly to the fact that none of our Member States have ratified the Protocol that will enable us to establish the Peace and Security Council. I therefore urge all of us, to move expeditiously so to ratify this Protocol so that we are able to respond to the demand of the masses of our people for peace. We must be able to constitute this Council by the time we meet at our regular session in Maputo, Mozambique.

At the same time, we have to address the issue of the social and economic development of our continent with the same sense of urgency. We have to move with a great sense of purpose towards the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. In this context, we have to ensure that we meet the objectives we set ourselves in NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, especially by ensuring the effective functioning of our Regional Economic Communities.

Our peoples throughout the continent have responded most positively to the institutional initiatives we have taken to expedite the process of the political and economic integration of Africa. They are keenly interested to participate in making their own contribution to the realisation of this goal. The Pan-African Parliament provided for by the Constitutive Act will be an important institution to help us achieve this objective.

The unfortunate reality however is that not enough of us have, as yet, ratified the Protocol that will enable us to establish this Parliament.

Again, I would like to appeal to all Member States to ensure that we correct this failing, so that by the time of the Maputo Assembly, we are able to constitute the Pan-African parliament.

Currently, the whole world is seized with the challenge of contributing to the effort to ensure that war does not break out over the issue of Iraq. The African representatives on the United Nations Security Council have the task effectively to present Africa's views on this important matter of life and death for many.

We have to ensure that we function in a manner that brings the collective weight of the continent to bear on this and other global challenges. This requires that all of us, individually and collectively, should rely on our Union as our cohesive and leading instrument as we play our role in the effort to ensure the emergence of a just and equitable world order.

Unfortunately, we have just failed to secure the necessary support for the candidate we put forward for the post of Director General of the World Health Organisation, the Prime Minister of Mozambique, Dr Pascoal Mocumbi.

In good measure, this failure was due to our inability to act in unity, despite the decision taken by our Executive Council to support and present Prime Minister Mocumbi as the sole African candidate.

We mention this matter, Your Excellencies, to point to the need emphasised by the Inaugural Assembly of the Union to ensure that our Union works effectively to unite us in promotion of our common goals, the matter that has brought us together to our Headquarters.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the members of our Central Organ for the Management, Prevention and Resolution of Conflicts on our continent for agreeing to stay on after the Assembly to consider various conflict situations confronting our continent. A request has also been made that the Central Organ should consider the question of Iraq to empower the African representatives on the Security Council to carry out their work correctly.

The expectations of the masses of our people for democracy, peace, development and prosperity have been enhanced. They are convinced that the conditions exist for their continent to achieve significant and sustained advances on all these matters. The decisions we take today will have to live up to these expectations. I am certain that this we will do.

Thank you.