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Some Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of the OAU/AU

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Introduction

In May this year, the OAU/AU will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of its establishment in 1963. As many anniversaries, the 50th anniversary is the time for celebration and reflections. Fifty years in the life of an organization, representing more than one-fourth of the members of the United Nations and in fastly changing world, is not perhaps too long period to take pessimistic or optimistic views of its achievements or on the future of Africa. Africans are not unaware of its successes, weaknesses and failures of the organization. Whatever are the views this anniversary has a special and great significance in African history.

It is appropriate, therefore to seize the occasion of this anniversary to take stock of our organization's activities and actions through the past fifty years and their influence on the millions of Africans across the continent. A genuine and deep appraisal of Africa's efforts during the past five decades assists us appreciate and consolidate which are of value and identify those areas of challenges to be addressed though joint efforts within our organization – the Africa Union and in the context of the international organizations.

There are of course valid reasons to celebrate because of what has been achieved in the past fifty years during which a large number of African countries gained sovereignty and independence after bitter and protracted struggle waged against colonialism and foreign domination. It is also during this period that African countries, albeit their number is still small and lately, have succeeded in registering fast economic growth, remarkable progress in reducing the levels of extreme poverty and hunger, ignorance and diseases etc.

Looking back over the last 50 years, much can be said about the organization's activities on a wide-ranging and complex issues. But, a glimpse at its history of the struggle to forge unity and solidarity, and other activities would suffice to make some observations.

Fifty years ago, in 1963, thirty two leaders of independent African states, aware of their role in the liberation of the peoples of Africa from colonial yoke, laid a solid foundation for strong unity through the establishment of our continental organization- the Organization of African Unity- which is the immediate predecessor of today's African Union.

Unity today, as it was fifty years ago, is the overwhelming demand of Africans across the continent. This is because our African experience vividly showed us that our Unity constituted an important thrust towards the total decolonization of our continent and laid the ground for the consolidation of our national sovereignty, identity and dignity. It is also because our unity has been a vibrant force in defense of our national independence after we successfully freed ourselves from colonial domination and racial oppression. Moreover, it was this strong spirit of Unity that contributed to our cause for more suitable world political and economic order which has enabled us to have our own say, however, it is little or limited. Again, it was to this spirit that our nations gained strength and genuine identity to safeguard our legitimate interests through the cold war era. It is in this strong sense of unity that real triumph of Africa lies today.

As we Africans created this spirit of unity, it is to our immense benefit to bring it to its full potential. It is within this context that we witnessed the commitments of Africa at Sirte in September 1999, Lome in July 2000, and Lusaka in July 2001 that led to the creation of the African Union in Durban in July 2002. The African Union represents a historical decision by Africa to fulfill the aspirations of Africans by achieving regional economic and political integration. This Union is also a concrete testimony to the deepening of our unity and to our serious commitment to further consolidate and guarantee our own precious political and economic liberty as independent nations.

As we celebrate the 50th Anniversary, it would be appropriate to look back on what we achieved so far through our unity in our common objectives of political and economic freedom, peace, justice and equality. In this regard, highlighting some of the wide-ranging achievements is essential.

First, the total liberation of the African continent from colonial rule and racial domination thereby restoring freedom and dignity to the peoples of Africa and providing the required political environment for Africa to become equal partner, like other regions of the world, in international relations to defend its legitimate interests.

Second, the establishment of the African Union through the adoption of its Constitutive Act and with the principal goal of working towards the full realization of the socio-economic integration of the continent and promotion of peace, security and stability on the continent as the necessary condition for sustainable development and democratic governance.

Third, the adoption of NEPAD (New Partnership for African Development) by the African Union which provides a platform for Africa and its partners to work for the promotion of sustainable development and good governance on the continent, for the eradication of poverty by meeting the Millennium Development goals set by the United Nations and for creating condition that leads to halting the marginalization of Africa in the globalization process. In this respect, the decision by African leaders to create the Peer Review Mechanism, which has a special role in assisting African nations to improve governance by taking the right democratic steps is a great achievement by itself.

Fourth, the launching of the Pan-African Parliament, which is designed to ensure the full participation of the African people in governance, development and economic integration of the continent. This is an important institution which the peoples of Africa, through their representatives, could contribute to the democratic governance, sustainable development and economic integration of our continent.

Fifth, the establishment of the African Peace and Security Council in order to respond adequately to the needs of Africa in the areas of conflict prevention, management and resolution as embodied in the Constitutive Act of the African Union. Moreover, in order to effectively address the growing challenges of peace and security, in particular with escalation of intra-state conflicts, the African

Union by rejecting the non-interference approach adopted instead a proactive and non-indifference stance in conflict situations like Liberia, Somalia and Sierra Leone. In this regard, the strategic step taken to create an African Stand by Force (ASF) is a case in point. Africa's Regional Economic Committees (RECs) SADEC, ECOWAS, ECCAS, IGAD and the AMU, which are structurally linked to the African Union's Peace and Security Architecture, are doing commendable job thereby critically contributing to the further strengthening of the continent's peace and security mechanisms. It is indeed very encouraging to note the efforts being deployed to help resolve conflicts in member states, in particular in the Sudan, Burundi, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and Somalia. The end of the war in Angola and the progress made in the consolidation of peace and security in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Great Lakes Region, Cote D'ivoire and recently in Mali are also significant achievements.

Sixth, It is gratifying to see that elections, which took place in number of African countries, were by and large smooth, fair and free, thereby strengthening good governance and stability on the continent. African Union's role in observing and monitoring political elections in African countries is not only well-recognized but its efforts towards strengthening democracy and governance in the continent have become a welcoming phenomena.

These accomplishments, despite the long and complex process in which Africa went through over the past fifty decades, demonstrate the relentless efforts deployed by African nations to achieve the underlying ideals of our unity. Indeed, much has been achieved in the fifty years since we forged unflinching solidarity and embarked on fully realizing the objectives of our unity. Nonetheless, the specter of poverty, the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria, tuberculosis, the resurgence of polio, ethnic strife and civil wars, social and economic difficulties and the challenges of globalization have yet to be addressed by Africa. Africa is still a long way from achieving the aspirations of its peoples who wish to live in peace, good health and prosperity. In today's real world, Africans cannot achieve these objectives based exclusively on their own. Because Africans live in a world of diversity.

The world today is in the process of profound and complex changes. It is no longer characterized by bipolarity. Rather, by unipolarity and with multitude of problems and challenges associated with global trade and governance, environment and climate, information technology, cancellation of debts, official development assistance, -many of these affecting Africa. The emerging countries from the South-China, India, Brazil, and South Africa are also new global political and economic forces to be reckoned with. That is why the involvement of our partners in our socio-economic development is imperative-although relying first and foremost on us is our firm principle. It is within this context that Africa is currently enjoying good partnerships mainly with Europe, United States, Japan, China, India, Brazil, Korean Republic, Turkey and Latin America through various cooperation programmes such as ACP (African Caribbean Pacific) EBA (Everything But Arms), AGOA (African Growth Opportunity Act), TICAD (Tokyo International Conference on African Development), ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation), FOCAC (Forum on China Africa Cooperation), KAF (Korea-Africa Forum), TAF (Turkey Africa Forum) and ASA (Africa-South America Partnership Forum).

With the emergence of new countries from the South, the potential for Africa to get more development assistance is tremendous. This a huge opportunity for Africa not only because of the availability of more resources and technical assistance, in particular to obtain aid or grants for infrastructure projects and human resource capacity building through training, but also from reducing or minimizing undesirable interference in internal affairs of Africa countries. Obviously, African has to balance its own interests with the legitimate interests of its partners like gaining access to markets or raw material on win-win basis. With this recognition, Africa, however, needs to connect its long-term development and social trajectory to new thinking of addressing the plethora of challenges the continent is presently confronted with. Such new and different approach must also take into account Africa's priceless assets that we all cherish and value most-unity and solidarity.

That is why the theme in this year's Africa's 50th anniversary day has shifted markedly away from the past narrative which focused on conflicts, poverty and hunger to the one that emphasizes on the solidarity and rebirth of the continent-with the theme "Pan Africanism and the African Renaissance". This theme is not only to address the huge challenges Africa faces today, but it also holds powerful message that reminds us of our common future, based on our common core values-unity, solidarity and belongingness. The theme, moreover, strongly underlines the need to recapture that spirit to renew our thinking and our actions and to take our common destiny in our own hands and assert ourselves as sovereign nations on the international stage. It is a total and new paradigm shift that transcends the past narrative. It is about a new collective future and the creation or rebirth of new Africa with a new narrative. In other words, it is a new African story.

This new narrative, no doubt, will resonate with the peoples of Africa and offers a new vision of Africa not only united but free, peaceful, democratic and prosperous. In light of this new common future, of course, we need the closest collaboration with those who share our vision and who are willing to cooperate with us in our struggle to free ourselves from cruel grasp of poverty, hunger, diseases, illiteracy-which are principal enemies of Africa. It is an enormous challenge which we face, yet it is far from insurmountable. We are confident that in unity, friendship and global cooperation the peoples of Africa will surely succeed in their struggle.

Today, there are fifty four voices that are raised in defense of Africa and African causes. We draw inspiration from this fact to look to the future of our continent confidently and courageously. We are confident because we are masters of our own fate. We are also courageous because we believe we are in a much better position to shape and mold our future and leave our imprint on events as they pass into history. ■

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