

Welcome statement by the Secretary General at the 98th session of the ACP Council of Ministers, 10 December 2013, Brussels - Belgium

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Your Excellency Honourable Tuilaepa Lufesolai SAILELE MALIELEGAOI, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs & Trade of the Independent State of Samoa,
Honourable Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Gentlemen and Women of the Press,

On my own behalf and on behalf of the ACP Secretariat, I welcome you all to Brussels and to ACP House. For many of you, it has been a long-winding and exhausting journey to Brussels, entailing dozens of hours of flight time. For our friends from the Pacific in particular, travelling to Brussels is a major investment in terms of time and resources -- and in terms of sheer energy!

We therefore thank you for being able to make this journey, which testifies to your commitment to the ACP family of nations.

Mr. President,

We meet at a time of challenges as well as opportunities. During the past year, the ACP, like many developing countries, found themselves in a global environment characterised by slow recovery and protracted risks in terms of possible relapse back into recession.

During 2012, global growth stood at 2.5 percent. By year's end 2013, the IMF projects global growth to improve marginally to 2.75 percent. China, the engine of growth for the world economy, underwent a marked slowdown for much of 2013, as did several the other countries of the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

The Euro zone, the principal trading partner of the ACP countries, continues to face major fiscal challenges, particularly in the Southern countries of Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece. Growth for the year 2013 has remained at a very weak 0.5 percent.

For us, an economically vibrant and prosperous Europe is of vital importance. Only a strong Europe can be a partner of progress with the ACP. We therefore continue to urge Europe's leaders to double their efforts in finding a way out of the current situation and to bring the world's largest economic and trading block back into the path of sustained growth.

From our calculations, the prospects for ACP countries, on the whole remain positive. Within the ACP Group, the Caribbean countries have continued to register steady growth at 3 percent for 2013 and a projected 3.5 percent for 2014. However, growth prospects would have been better were it not for the reduction in remittances and income from tourism due to the slowdown in the United States economy. The Pacific Islands registered a more modest growth of 2.2 percent during 2013, projected to reach 2.5 percent in 2014.

The African region has shown strong performance during 2013, with growth averaging 5 percent and projected to reach 5.9 percent in 2014.

Mr. President,

Africa today is seen by many observers as 'the new frontier' for global investors. There has been much talk about the formidable economic performance of the "the African lions" – of countries such as Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea and Mozambique – that are recording strong macroeconomic indices.

Africa may well be on the verge of a new gilded age of liberty and economic prosperity. This can only augur well for intra-ACP cooperation in trade and investments.

I am also happy to report that hope has been restored in Mali. The international community, in collaboration with the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) took decisive action to drive out the terrorists and reunify the country. The Republic of Mali conducted successful national elections in July 2013, in which Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was elected President.

Honourable Ministers,

We, however, remain very concerned about the geopolitical challenges that have resurfaced in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the looming spectre of conflict and strife. We welcome the Trust Fund that has been set up by the International Contact Group for the CAR, as well as the initiative for the Africa-led International Mission that aims to restore peace to that

troubled country.

We urge our ACP family of nations to show solidarity in moral as well as material terms with the people of the CAR so that, together, we can build the foundations for a just and lasting peace in that nation.

Your Excellencies,

I can make bold to say that democracy is being consolidated in the majority of our ACP nations. A strong democratic ethos has taken firm root in the Caribbean as well as in majority of the Pacific Islands. Successful elections have recently been held in Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea.

While democracy is being consolidated in our countries, we have to underline the fact that poverty remains a nightmare that refuses to go away – the dividends of liberty are yet to translate into better living conditions for millions of our citizens. Youth unemployment, in particular, remains a major challenge, as does the scourge of Climate Change and its attendant effects.

It is clear that transformational leadership, aided by the precepts of good governance and effective institutions -- with support by our international development partners -- will continue to be essential in building the foundations for long-term prosperity in our nations.

Mr. President,

Permit me to draw your attention to another major challenge, and that is the question of terrorism. The new ideology of violent extremism is a worldwide evil which must be stopped through collective action by all civilized nations. We must therefore lend support to countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Somalia that are battling with terrorist insurgents who seem hell-bent on overturning constitutional authority and plunging the nation into chaos.

In early October, terrorists took over a shopping mall in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi. They went on a shooting spree that led to the loss of 67 innocent souls, including women and children.

On behalf of the ACP Group, I sent a strong message of solidarity to H. E. President Uhuru Kenyatta and the Government and peace-loving people of Kenya, while condemning these atrocities in the strongest terms possible.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

The Kenyan attacks touched me at a rather personal level. One of the victims happened to be my fellow compatriot Professor Kofi Awoonor. A poet, scholar, diplomat, statesman and distinguished pan-African intellectual, the late Awoonor was a friend and a neighbor of mine in Accra. He had gone to Nairobi to give a talk at a conference and had accompanied his son to a restaurant in that mall on that fateful afternoon of Friday the 4th of October. While the son sustained severe injuries, the father never made it.

For us, it was poignant irony that a poet and humanist who lived the ideals of love and universal brotherhood was to meet such a violent end in the hands of people who know neither love nor God.

Honourable Ministers,

Last week we returned from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, which hosted the 34th Session of the ACP Parliamentary Assembly and the 26th Session of the Joint ACP-EU Parliamentary Assembly (JPA). The levels of attendance and participation were high. The Ethiopians are a legend in terms of organizational prowess. They left no stone unturned to ensure that the meeting was a great success.

The Parliamentary Assembly and the JPA are unique institutions in the annals of international development cooperation. Our unique brand of international parliamentarianism embodies dialogue of civilizations that is so crucial to building understanding and trust in our divided world.

Turning to our Organization, the ACP, we have continued to make progress in terms of sustaining the momentum of hope. When I assumed the mantle of leadership at the Secretariat in April, I expressly committed the Secretariat to sustaining and consolidating the good work that had been done thus far.

We have kept the faith; we have continued to implement the key pillars of the Strategic Plan, "Strategy for Renewal and Transformation". We have also continued to serve our Principal Organs and the key stakeholders while interfacing with our European development partners. I have also represented the ACP at key international conferences where our presence is needed and where we can make a difference.

Mr. President,

This building that currently serves as our Secretariat is over 40 years old. It has become run-down and no longer fits our needs as a forward-looking international organization. This Conference Room in particular has over the years proved to be woefully inadequate and at every session of Council the Secretariat faces the embarrassment of not being able to seat all delegations around the table in a manner befitting of their sovereign dignity.

I am happy to report that our European partners have approved the sum of €18 million from the Tenth EDF towards a more befitting edifice for the ACP. During the early part of the coming year, we will expedite action towards finalizing the technical study on the new ACP building. We will continue to keep you informed on progress in the implementation of this important project.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many of you may not realize that we are a modest Secretariat of just under 100 people, with a small outpost in Geneva. We

are serving 80 nations with a population nearly a billion people. By contrast, the EU Commission has over 3,000 staff, serving 28 countries and a population of 500 million.

I do not need to remind you that we operate a shoestring budget as contrasted with our comparators such as the Commonwealth of Nations and Organisation internationale de la francophonie (OIF).

Honourable Ministers,

I am constrained to stress this point, because, as small as our budget is, it is always a Herculean task to get member states to pay up their statutory obligations. As I speak, only 60 percent of contributions from member states have been received for the year 2013. My accounting department keeps reminding me that we are virtually in the red as far as operating cash balances are concerned.

Your Excellencies,

The Secretariat will continue to do its part to advance the interests of our ACP member States and to discharge our duties to you, our political principals.

But you also have to do your part to support your organization to better serve our collective interests by paying up your assessed contributions as, and when, due. I therefore strongly urge Honourable Ministers to please expedite action on this matter so that we would not fall into any form of pecuniary embarrassment as the New Year approaches.

Mr. President, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies,

As we look to the future, we are filled with renewed hope. We will continue to forge ahead in building a strong foundation for our collective future. The work of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) chaired by former Nigerian President Chief Olusegun Obasanjo is making considerable progress. We are confident that, in their collective wisdom, the EPG will come up with bold new scenarios that we can pursue in building a viable future for our nations.

During the Seventh Summit, our leaders approved the project to create an ACP Trade and Investment Vehicle. I am happy to report that considerable progress has been made on this score. The technical study has been completed and there is evidence that a yawning financing gap does exist and that the project is, indeed, feasible.

A sense of urgency has been infused into the matter by the recent call by our European partners to dialogue together on how we can upscale our private sector strategy to ensure that business becomes the locomotive for growth in our countries and regional communities. We are putting together a Task Force to drive the implementation of the project during the coming year.

Mr. President,

Honourable Ministers,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have a busy couple of days ahead of us. Your role is to provide leadership, guidance and vision. Our job is to take the ball and to run with it, if I may borrow the language of rugby. Standing together, there is no mountain we cannot scale -- and no valley we cannot surmount. Therefore, let us forge ahead together in solidarity and in hope.

I thank you once again and wish you very fruitful deliberations.

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