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**ADDRESS BY ADV. BIENCE GAWANAS, COMMISSIONER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS,  
ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION  
DURING THE 1<sup>ST</sup> SESSION OF THE AU CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS OF SPORT,  
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA, 4-8 JUNE 2007**

**OPENING CEREMONY**

**7 JUNE 2007**

- Our Keynote Speaker, HE Mr Lamine Diack, President of IAAF,
- Honourable Ministers and Head of Delegations
- Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- Governmental Experts of the Member States
- Representatives of the Sport Movement, UN Agencies, International Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

When we started the Expert meeting two days ago, we did so with mixed emotions. On the one hand, we were happy and excited to meet as governmental experts, sports movement and representatives from UN Agencies, International Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations at this very first conference of Ministers of Sport under the AU. But on the other hand, the news that we lost one of our Ministers, Honourable Atipe Kwako and other Togolese officials, supporters and crew in a helicopter crash on Sunday left us with sadness. We also learnt with sadness that many people died as a result of a stampede during a African Cup of Nations Qualifier match in Zambia. What brings it closer to our home is the fact that in both instances, they all happened after sporting events. We expressed therefore condolences to the

families of the departed and also to the Government and the People of Togo and Zambia.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this first session of the AU Conference of Ministers of Sport. I extend to you the warm greetings of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H. E. Alpha Omar Konare. I am indeed honoured to address you on his behalf and to say how much pleasure I feel in being part of a historic moment for sport in Africa when Ministers, experts and the sport movement is meeting for the first time under the umbrella of the Africa Union

As your Excellencies are aware, sport can be used to tackle challenges such as promotion of education, peace building, healthy lifestyles and fostering socio-economic development. Sport can provide an arena for social inclusion and support by reaching out to the most vulnerable and disenfranchised people. It can be a powerful way of empowering persons with disabilities, promoting the role of women in society, and giving a voice to youth. Through bringing people together, sport crosses boundaries and opens dialogue in a safe space.

Sports have been successful in addressing many of Africa's problems. For example, HIV/AIDS education and awareness programmes have used sports to help children and young people find strength and information in games and in the joy of sports. Sports activities also offer an opportunity for much-needed physical activity for HIV positive people. The majority of the people who participate in sports activities belong to high-risk groups, thus AIDS work in sports is important. Sports can provide an arena for social inclusion and support, which is extremely important for HIV positive people, and where important values such as volunteering can be nurtured and fostered.

Sport has above all succeeded in putting Africa on the World map. Our continent has offered the best of the best and has given a new meaning to the world of sport. Our sport persons have won medals; they have become our ambassadors and spokesperson on various causes and have created the positive image of Africa.

These are all the positive spin-offs of sport. However, challenges remain: Participation in sport is still very low in most of the Member States. One such challenge is how to promote participation of women and girls and persons with disabilities in sports, and how to mainstream their equality in access to and participation in sports projects and programmes. Such participation should not only be limited to sporting activities but we need to increase role models for example women coaches or leaders, and the representation of women in the decision-making bodies of sporting institutions.

Women face numerous barriers in relation to participating in sports. Often, women and girls are discouraged from participation in sports because of household chores and caring for other family members. It is also important to recognize that women may be particularly exposed to physical and verbal harassment due to lack of safe and appropriate sport facilities, lack of skills and resources, which again contributes to the lack of participation of women in sports.

Sports initiatives should therefore take into account the perspectives of the disadvantaged and marginalized by dealing with discrimination and exclusion of women and persons with disabilities and youth.

Other challenges relate to the marginal role played by Physical education in schools, the inadequate attention given to Ministries of Sport in terms of resources; relationship between governments and national and International sport organizations, lack of resources and poor infrastructure as sport is not regarded as an investment but rather as an expenditure which always needs to be reduced, doping, corruption and poor governance and capacity building to name but a few.

**Your Excellencies,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

A decade ago, African sport was the subject of few forums during the 1990's in Lausanne, Switzerland, and in Johannesburg, South Africa with the participation of several Ministers of Youth and Sport, Presidents of Confederations, National Olympic Committees and representatives of inter-governmental organizations. Since then we

came a long way to where we are today, thanks to the commitment of Governments, continental coordinating bodies, and of course, the African Union after its inception. We managed to reflect together on the fate of sport on the continent, and to formulate relevant proposals.

This First AU Conference of Ministers of Sport therefore ushers in a new era of coordinated policy development in the domain of sport. The Conference is expected to sharpen our focus by coordinating efforts of the AU Commission and AU Member States and the sport movement. The implementation of the outcomes of this Conference will be instrumental in forging a Common African Sports Agenda.

I also wish to remind you that during 2006, Ministers of Youth and subsequently the Executive Council and the Assembly of Heads of States and Government of the African Union adopted the Youth Charter which in Article 22 makes specific reference to Leisure, Recreation, Sportive and Cultural Activities. It states that young people has the right to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities that are part of the healthy lifestyle as well as to participate freely in sport, physical education, drama, the arts, music and other forms of cultural life. It obliges States Parties to the Charter to amongst others make provision for equal access for young man and women to sport, physical education, drama, cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities and to put in place adequate infrastructure and services in rural and urban areas for youth to participate in these activities. This is an important instrument but can only become effective if 15 Member States ratify it. Thus far only Mali, Burundi, Togo and Benin has signed but not ratified the Charter. We are therefore urging our Member States to do the necessary to ensure the coming in force of this Charter so that we can guarantee our youth a better life for all. On the part of the Commission, the Department of Human resources is embarking on a drive to popularize the Charter and also to advocate for its ratification

**Your Excellencies,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

Your experts met over the last two days and discussed various matters ranging from the AU Policy and Programme on Sport, through the restructuring of the SCSA and the relationships between Government and organizations. They also received reports on the IYoAF and the WC2010 Africa Legacy Programme as well as briefings on various sporting activities, which are due to take place this year and next year. During this meeting, you will also receive briefings by various sport bodies. I am satisfied to report that the Experts did a job well done. They participate actively in the deliberations and made very valuable and insightful contributions, which no doubt will enhance the sport on the continent. They did so in a spirit of cooperation, frankness and showed their compassion for sport. I am sure that once you read their report that you will agree with me that they have done their job well.

The main item on the agenda for your consideration will be the Report of the Experts. This Report will contain the deliberations and the recommendations made during the last two days. At the end of your meeting, you will adopt main conclusions and recommendations based on the report of the experts and other matters, which you have considered.

As this is the 1<sup>st</sup> conference, we will present a briefing on the rules and procedure for the convening and conduct of ministerial conferences under the AU. The rules of procedure relate to matters such as election of the bureau, the conduct and frequency of meetings, venue and hosting of meetings, the participation of sporting organization and other organizations as observers, etc. It is imperative for Ministers to decide on the frequency of the meeting as well as the date and venue of the next conference. It is my wish that before the end of your meeting, we will all know where the 2<sup>nd</sup> session of the AU Ministerial Conference of Ministers of Sport will take place.

I thank you for your attention.