

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT OF COUNCIL

■ **Hon. Mr. Phandu SKELEMANI**

**On the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Eminent Persons
Group at ACP House, Brussels**

(Monday 25 March 2013)

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT OF COUNCIL

Your Excellencies;

Secretary-General Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

It is my honour and pleasure to welcome you all to ACP House on the auspicious occasion of the inauguration of the ACP Eminent Persons Group (EPG). According to an ancient story, when a boy King was born in ancient Palestine over two millenniums ago, wise men from the East beheld his star. They decided to set off on a long journey to behold the future king and to present him with their offerings of gold, myrrh and frankincense.

Following the Seventh Summit of our ACP Heads of State and Government, our leaders in their wisdom, approved the setting up of an Eminent Persons Group to infuse a new spirit and more innovative ideas towards the repositioning of the ACP as an intergovernmental organisation. The members of the EPG were selected from our various regions, giving careful attention to qualifications,

knowledge and experience. We are proud of the team that has been put together by the Secretary-General. We have among us former Heads of State and Government, former ministers and distinguished international civil servants.

I am proud to say that you are the wise men and women of the ACP, selected for your breadth of knowledge, wisdom and experience.

According to an old African saying, “When the music changes, so does the dance”. We at the ACP are keenly aware that the music is changing not only in Europe but also in our member states, and, indeed, globally. It was in recognition of this fact that we launched our own dialogue process through the *Sub-Committee on Future Perspectives* chaired by H.E. Dr. Patrick Gomes, the distinguished Ambassador of Guyana to the European Union and the Kingdoms of Belgium and Luxembourg. I am confident that this brainstorming session will further enrich our thinking on how to take forward the agenda of change and renewal.

The ACP comprises 79 member countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the islands of the Pacific. With the prospect of the new Republic of South Sudan joining, our membership is expected to rise to eighty.

The origins of the ACP date back to the Rome Treaty 1957, when the former French African colonial dependencies were brought into Association status with the European Common Market as it then was. The founding document of the ACP is the Georgetown Agreement 1975 which defines the membership, the institutions and the role and functions of the Principal Organs. The heart of the ACP's activities lies in the operation of the Secretariat and the Committee of Ambassadors and their interface with the European Commission and other EU institutions.

The ACP today is the largest trans-regional intergovernmental organisation of developing countries in the international system. The key principles underpinning intra-ACP cooperation are anchored on commitment to diversity as a source of strength and a shared vision of a common future; democracy and rights-based development; and solidarity in facing the challenges of a world defined by

ever-increasing interdependence, and rapid and constant evolution. Equally important for us is human development and the pursuit of a fair, open and rules-based multilateral trading system that accords the highest priority to development issues.

Your Excellencies,

When the Lomé Agreement was signed in 1975, it was widely greeted as symbol of hope in a divided world; a model of North-South cooperation based on dialogue rather than confrontation. Its successor, the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, signed in 2000 for a period of 20 years, is anchored on three complementary pillars: (i) development cooperation; (ii) trade cooperation and (iii) political dialogue. The Agreement provides a timetable for a radical reform of trade relations between the EU and the ACP States, marking a departure from the old non-reciprocal trade preferences that had existed in the past. A series of deadlines for the progressive abolition of trade barriers and the introduction of WTO compatible free trade were promulgated in Article 37 of the Agreement.

The EDF has been the main institutional focus for ACP-EU development financing. Total resources made available under the 10th EDF to cover the six year period 2008 – 2013 amount to €22.682 billion. During year's end 2011, the EU Commission proposed an amount of €32 billion for the 2014—2020 EDF-11 funding cycle, subject to further negotiation with EU Member States.

Friends and colleagues,

As we face the years ahead, we recognise the need to reinvent the ACP as a meaningful player on the world stage. As you are all aware, the Lisbon Treaty came into force in December 2009. The Treaty seeks a major overhaul of the European system and far-reaching restructuring of its key institutions. What has been rather troubling for the ACP is the fact that the Treaty makes no express reference to the long-standing partnership between the EU and the ACP.

It is also unclear whether the EDF will come under the Commission budget and if the ACP countries can feel entitled to a predictable source of development assistance as has been the case hitherto. Global re-alignments and

major shifts in EU policy orientations have given rise to concerns of possible downgrading of the importance of the ACP-EU Partnership.

The EU's neighbourhood focus with regard to Eastern Europe and North Africa; and its rapprochement with Latin America and the general thrust of its development policy re-orientation has led to considerable anxiety among ACP members.

Yours Excellencies,

It is evident that the ACP will continue to need Europe as a predictable source of ODA to finance their development. Europe, on the other hand, will continue to be a key player in many of those countries not only in terms of development assistance but also in the area of humanitarian intervention and political dialogue. Europe has technology and skills, while the ACP has an abundance of natural-resource endowments. There is therefore a basis for interdependence and mutuality of interests. This fact, unfortunately, is not always appreciated by some of the newer members of the European Union.

Also, at a time of unprecedented fiscal crisis in the Euroland area, the dictates of parsimony may threaten to outweigh the sentiment of generosity.

It is my personal conviction that Europe will continually need the ACP to validate its evolving role as a global actor in international relations. As principal donor to the ACP, the EU has access to 79 member countries within its sphere of diplomatic and geopolitical influence. We cannot also overlook the fact that the ACP has sometimes wielded its numerical strength and moral authority in support of EU international agendas, as exemplified by its support for EU representation in the UN General Assembly.

The rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa -- the nations generally referred to as the BRICS -- offers a new window of opportunity. We at the ACP can leverage on our numeric strength and moral authority to promote our collective interests while building new alliances with the emerging economies of Asia and Latin America. A collective strategy to tap these opportunities has to be part of our overall future orientation of the ACP.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

An ancient prophet once declared that, “Without wisdom, the people perish”. As the wise men of the ACP, the lot has fallen on you to map out a new vision and new path for our ACP family of nations. You have a busy two years ahead of you. We have faith and confidence that you will use your collective wisdom to bring about a rebirth of our organisation that will see us into rest of the twenty-first century. It is therefore my pleasure to formally inaugurate the Eminent Persons Group.

Thank you once again and let me wish you very fruitful deliberations.
