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*Statement by the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Netherlands
Lilianne Ploumen at the opening ceremony of the 41st session of the ACP-EU Council of
Ministers*

28th April 2016 - Dakar, Senegal

Your Excellency Mr President, Fellow Ministers and colleagues, Commissioner, distinguished representatives of the EU and ACP member states, ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen.

I am very pleased and honoured to co-chair the 41st session of the Joint ACP-EU Council of Ministers at the request of the EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini, and on behalf of the Council of the European Union.

Our annual ACP-EU ministerial meeting is an important occasion that allows us to discuss some very important topics and make decisions for the future of our countries and regions.

First of all, I would like to thank our host country Senegal for organising this meeting. The EU remains committed to its strong and fruitful alliance with Senegal on many issues at bilateral, regional and global level. For many years, we have joined our efforts to promote stability and prosperity in the region, and we are looking forward to pursue these goals together in the future.

We have many crucial topics on our agenda, starting with the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. After the important agreement reached last year in the United Nations on the 2030 Agenda, the challenge now is to see how best we can cooperate and establish common ground with a view to the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. I would like to emphasise the integrated, indivisible and universal nature of the Agenda, which should guide us also in bringing our ACP-EU partnership in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Another global challenge, which is closely related to sustainable development, is the urgently needed climate action. We will discuss in depth the outcomes of the Conference of the Parties to

the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), held in Paris from 30 November to 12 December 2015. We should build on the successful alliance between EU and ACP states in the COP21 negotiations. And I know this is a particularly important common concern with our Caribbean and Pacific partners.

Our deliberations will also be dedicated to migration, where it is important to step up our common engagement to tackle the issue from all directions. As you remember, we had an important discussion on migration and development in the Joint Council in Brussels last year, and we need to follow up on that. Here in Dakar we will have the opportunity to discuss the outcomes of the Valetta Summit that was held in November 2015, and the state-of-play of the implementation of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Let me stress that we need to make the best use of our ongoing dialogue on migration and development, as well as other provisions of Article 13 of the Cotonou Agreement.

In the area of trade cooperation, we will take stock of the negotiations and implementation of Economic Partnership Agreements and discuss the outcomes of the 10th WTO Ministerial Conference. As you know, despite the fact that this has been a somewhat difficult issue in our relationship, we have made good progress, notably in West Africa and the Southern Africa Region. Therefore it would be in our mutual interest to proceed very soon to sign, ratify and implement the recently initialled EPAs.

Staying in the economic dimension, our cooperation in private sector development is of utmost importance for responding to many of the other challenges, including sustainable development and some of the root causes of migration. That is why I would like to stress the importance of the implementation of the Joint ACP-EU Cooperation Framework for Private Sector Development Support in ACP Countries adopted in Nairobi in 2014.

In tomorrow's session, we will be happy to inform you about the preparation of a new EU Global strategy on Foreign and Security Policy. This new strategy is being prepared in the context of a changing global order, which is more complex, more connected and more contested than ever before. Our challenge is to facilitate a peaceful transition towards this new order, and this means reinforcing and rethinking our current multilateral order to ensure that everybody has a stake in it.

Ladies and gentleman,

As you all know, the Cotonou agreement will expire in 2020, and reflection is well underway both within the European Union and in the ACP countries on how to organise our relations in the future. I am looking forward to the special event this afternoon of informal discussions with eminent panelists on the future of our partnership after 2020. In light of this event and our informal exchange of views tomorrow, allow me to say a few words on our future relations in my national capacity as Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. I would like to contribute to the honest debate ACP SG Gomes called for in his opening.

Our partnership is valuable: we need each other to address the current global challenges like poverty, climate change, inequality and illegal migration. The Lomé Convention enabled countries to work together on the basis of equality in 1975. That was a pioneering step: a drastic and badly needed innovation. It was also the first time that aid and trade were explicitly linked. A combination I myself, as Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, am pursuing today, 40 years after Lomé and 15 years after Cotonou.

At first sight, it may be tempting to continue with the current agreement between the ACP Group and the EU with some modifications, but in my view this would actually run counter to the thinking that lay behind the Lomé and Cotonou agreements. Those agreements were anything but business as usual. They were a bold expression of the change in global relations. Instead of mimicking the existing zeitgeist, they helped create a new one; and that's why these agreements have endured for so long.

Today, 40 years on, I believe it's once again time for bold action. We owe it to Lomé and Cotonou to have the courage to think outside the box; to be innovative once more. We would be selling ourselves short if we were to stick to the same course.

Two things clearly demonstrate this:

First, the ACP countries on three different continents (from Barbados to Mali) have developed in very different directions. While it is of course up to them to decide about their future and the composition, a new partnership should also pursue the EU's interests in particular regions, like

enhanced cooperation on migration, climate change and trade. Such diverse interests are not served by a single overarching agreement.

Second, the Cotonou partnership has become too restrictive. It limits the overall coherence of the EU's external action and is too restrictive for other countries. Least developed countries, like Afghanistan and Bangladesh are not covered by it. These countries don't have the same benefits, simply because they happen to have had a different history. That is not only inefficient and runs counter to the Commission's work towards a coherent and integrated external policy. It is also unjust.

Do I want to downgrade relations with countries or regions in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific? Absolutely not! On the contrary, all 79 ACP countries are important partners for the EU and I want to deepen these ties. So what do we need to nurture our relations and make them fit for purpose?

I believe it makes sense for relations to have a stronger regional basis. Regionalisation is an undeniable trend, and organisations like the African Union and other regional bodies are becoming more important as political players dealing with a wide range of global challenges. Also, relations should be more equal. On paper, Lomé and Cotonou made genuine cooperation possible, because all parties could hold one another to account on issues like human rights and good governance. But in reality, we clung too firmly to a donor/recipient relationship. The new universal 2030 Agenda for sustainable development rightly places more emphasis on universality: the new goals apply to us all. That is what we need to build on.

Today's global development challenges require more flexible approaches to global cooperation. In the spirit of Lomé and Cotonou, let's make a pact with the future instead of the past. Let's not choose the path of least resistance. Rather, let's do everything in our power to build a modern, equal and meaningful partnership.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I look forward to our productive and fruitful deliberations today and tomorrow. I am confident that they will take place in an open and constructive spirit.

Thank you.