

**Statement on the Theme of the AU for the Year 2023: “Accelerated
Implementation of the AfCFTA”**

H.E. Wamkele Mene

Secretary-General

AfCFTA Secretariat

Your Excellency President Azali Assoumani, President of the Union of the Comoros and Chairperson of the African Union;

Your Excellency President Macky Sall, President of the Republic of Senegal;

Your Excellencies Heads of States & Government;

Your Excellency Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission;

Your Excellency, President of the State of Palestine;

Your Excellencies Former Heads of States & Government;

Your Excellency Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations;

Your Excellency Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States;

Your Excellencies Ministers;

Your Excellencies Commissioners of the AUC;

Your Excellencies Heads of AU Organs;

Your Excellencies Heads of Regional Economic Communities;

Your Excellencies Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives;

Distinguished Ladies & Gentleman.

At the outset, permit me to express my gratitude to the Assembly of Heads of States & Government for the unwavering commitment and support to the African Continental Free Trade Area, to ensure that it becomes a reality. It was

last year in February during your 35th Ordinary Session that you approved the African Union Theme of the Year for 2023 to be “Acceleration of AfCFTA Implementation”.

The Theme of this year coincides with the 60th commemoration of the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity, in this historic city of Addis Ababa. 60 years after our founding mothers and fathers established the OAU, the AfCFTA is a tool to be deployed by the African Union to position Africa to adequately respond to the challenges confronting our continent, the public health crisis from which the continent is emerging and of course the food insecurity crisis that is attributable to the current geo-political context. In the area of public health, the concluded Protocol on Intellectual Property Rights which the Assembly will adopt today, is an important instrument that has the potential to address Africa’s public health and industrial development imperatives. To address the food insecurity crisis, the Council of Ministers of Trade resolved to develop a strategy for boosting intra-Africa trade in Agricultural products, an important outcome of the recent meeting of the Council of Ministers Responsible for Trade that was held in Gaborone, Botswana.

Your Excellencies Heads of States & Governments, Ladies & Gentleman;

You will recall that last year in November at your 17th Extraordinary Session that took place in Niamey, Niger, you took note of and endorsed the conclusion of the negotiations of the Protocols on Investment, Competition Policy and Intellectual Property Rights. I wish to thank the Ministers of Trade, under the leadership of Minister Yves Fernand Mamfounbi of the Gabonaise Republic for successfully concluding the negotiations within the deadline that you as the Assembly had established. As you directed, the three Protocols were subjected to legal review and subsequently adopted by the Ministers of the STC on Justice & Legal Affairs. The conclusion of the Protocols on Investment, Competition and Intellectual Property Rights provides a legal basis to anchor an effective and comprehensive “One African market” and shall be an accelerator for reaching the aspirations of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Later this afternoon, H.E. President Mahamadou Issoufou, the Champion of the AfCFTA will elaborate more on this important milestone of the conclusion of these protocols. We owe H.E. President Mahamadou Issoufou a debt of gratitude for his unwavering commitment and leadership in delivering the AfCFTA. It is due to his tireless

efforts, that Africa has been able to confound critiques by achieving substantial progress in a very complicated multilateral trade negotiation, in a very short period of time.

Having concluded the Protocols on Investment, Competition and Intellectual Property Rights, in this year of accelerated implementation of the AfCFTA under your leadership as the Assembly, we are on track to conclude the Protocols on Digital Trade and the Protocol on Women & Youth in Trade. The Protocol on digital Trade, among other important objectives, is set to broaden access to trade – particularly for SMEs that are led by women and young entrepreneurs – thereby addressing the critical imperative of digital financial inclusion and the need for more investment in digital financial inclusion. I am most grateful to H.E. Mama President Samia Suluhu Hassan for having hosted the inaugural Women & Youth in Trade AfCFTA Conference that was held in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania in September 2022.

The acceleration of the implementation of the AfCFTA shall not only be in the context of concluding the establishment of the legal construct, it shall also be in accelerating commercially meaningful new market access across the AfCFTA market. In this regard, the Council of Ministers of Trade congratulated and welcomed the Market Access Offer or Tariff Offer that the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) recently submitted, an important step in our desire to boost intra-Africa trade and create commercially meaningful opportunities for our private sector, particularly SMEs that are led by women and young Africans.

Where there is strong collaboration among all organs and specialized agencies of the African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), accelerating the implementation of the AfCFTA shall produce the results we all desire. In accelerating the implementation of the AfCFTA in accordance with the theme of this year, we must leverage on Africa's development finance institutions such as our strategic partners Afreximbank and AfDB, to ensure that we build on the success recorded thus far.

Working together with the AU family, Afreximbank and AfDB, we have achieved significant success since February 2020. Under extremely difficult circumstances caused by the pandemic and a challenging geo-economic context of our time, we have been able to make significant and meaningful advancements:

- We established a AfCFTA Adjustment Fund, which through Afreximbank, already has a US\$1 billion capitalisation and more to be raised, to enable all AfCFTA State Parties to benefit from the AfCFTA;
- We commenced commercially meaningful trade under the Guided Trade Initiative, where eight countries Ghana, Egypt, Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya, Mauritius, Cameroon, Tunisia, traded goods under the preferential rules of the AfCFTA. The most important aspect of the Guided Trade Initiative was in demonstrating that beyond enhanced trade flows in Africa – which is important – the AfCFTA can deliver inclusive benefits and opportunities for the marginalised. The tea that was exported from Kenya to Ghana was produced by small-holder farmers, whom the government of Kenya has organised into cooperatives for export under the AfCFTA. A remarkable story of inclusivity in trade, a remarkable story of Africa demonstrating that trade does not have to be intrinsically a zero-sum game.
- Working with Afreximbank, we launched the Pan-African Payments & Settlement System, to facilitate trade in local currency under the AfCFTA. The immediate beneficiaries of the PAPSS are SME that are led by women and young entrepreneurs who seek to take advantage of a market whose combined GDP is projected to be close to US\$7 trillion by the year 2035.
- In record time, we established a fully functional secretariat that has a 50/50 gender parity, that has as many men as it has women, including in the most senior leadership positions, that has language and representation of all of Africa's region. 35% of the staff of the Secretariat is under the age of 35, yet we have to do more to ensure youth empowerment and to advance the gender parity, particularly in the male dominated area of trade law and trade policy. In establishing a fully functional Secretariat – in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic – I wish to thank H.E. President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo, for giving meaning to Pan-Africanism by fully supporting the AfCFTA Secretariat.
- On Rules of Origin, I wish to report to you that for the first time in the economic history of Africa, we have reached 88.3% convergence. In the almost 5000 products that are traded in Africa, we now have a single set of rules for trade in 88.3 percent of those products. Which has the potential to position our continent as an appealing investment destination and for accelerated industrial development. Of course, we have more to do in the area of rules of origin for the automotive sector

and Textiles & Clothing, but the Council of Ministers of Trade are actively seized with this negotiation.

Your Excellencies Heads of States & Governments, Ladies & Gentleman;

The comprehensive roadmap for implementation of the theme for this year, relies significantly on all AU organs, agencies and RECs for successful implementation and to enable us to transition from negotiations to practical steps that have to be taken for implementation of the AfCFTA.

Through the Chairperson, His Excellency Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, may I invite the official launch of the Theme of the Year 2023, “Accelerating Implementation of the AfCFTA”.

I have said nothing about challenges that we shall confront along the way, because the challenges that we certainly shall confront must not define our resolve to succeed. As we take a positive step towards reaching the milestones of the Abuja Treaty, we must expect that economic and market integration is difficult yet worthwhile task.

I conclude with the words of the late Comrade President Thomas Isadore Sankara, “We must dare to invent the future”. Allow me to paraphrase the words of Comrade President Sankara, we must dare to invent the economic and future of the Africa that we want.

I thank you.