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**STATEMENT OF THE
CHAIRPERSON OF THE COMMISSION OF THE AFRICAN UNION,
MR. MOUSSA FAKI MAHAMAT,
ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCHING OF THE
INTERGOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY FOR
DEVELOPMENT HIGH-LEVEL REVITALISATION
FORUM ON SOUTH SUDAN**

ADDIS ABABA, 18 DECEMBER 2017

Honourable Prime Minister Haile Mariam Dessaegn,

Distinguished Representatives of IGAD Member States,

Representatives of partner countries and institutions,

Brothers and Sisters of South Sudan,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This week will certainly remain in the annals as one of the most crucial in the post-independence history of South Sudan.

It can mark the beginning of a genuine reconciliation and the end of the nightmare that the people of your country have been living through for four years. It can also be synonymous with the loss of any hope of resolving the conflict that rages in South Sudan in the short and medium term and the perpetuation, rather the worsening of a disaster that has already reached alarming proportions.

This is to say that a heavy responsibility lies on the shoulders of all the delegates here present.

I am obviously addressing myself to the Government, because, as an internationally recognized authority, it holds the destiny of the country in its hands and, as such, has a special role to play.

But I am also addressing myself to the political parties and leaders of all affiliations, civil society, religious leaders, women and men assembled here, because each and every one of you has a role to play, a responsibility to shoulder. Peace requires the involvement of one and all.

Your people have their eyes fixed on Addis Ababa. After so many unsuccessful attempts at resolving the crisis and dashed hopes, they expect an awakening from you, a turnaround, an act that can convince them that you truly have their fate at heart.

The international community, too, has its eyes fixed on Addis Ababa. On the eve of this meeting, there were calls from many corners, imploring you to finally put aside partisan and selfish interests, to take full measure of the tragedy afflicting your country and its people, in order to rise to what is at stake: nothing less than the survival of South Sudan as a State and a human community.

These hopes cannot be dashed. These hopes should not be dashed.

Your people will not understand it; they will not forgive you if you were to squander the unique opportunity offered by this Revitalization Forum organized by IGAD.

The region, which has shown remarkable care and solicitude for you, and your other partners in the international community will grow more skeptical of your commitment to close the current sad and tragic chapter.

Dear Brothers and Sisters of South Sudan,

While speaking to you today, I cannot help but point out the symbol of organizing the Forum here, at the Headquarters of the African Union, in the Nelson Mandela Hall.

2018 will mark the centenary of the one we affectionately called Madiba, while 2017 was that of another hero of the anti-apartheid struggle and apostle of tolerance. I am here referring to Oliver Tambo.

Madiba placed national reconciliation in South Africa at the center of his political action as President. There is no need to dwell on the sacrifices he made, the deprivations he imposed on himself, to ensure that the cause of justice triumphed in his country. He suffered personally and directly the iniquity and inhumanity of the apartheid system.

But that only strengthened his commitment to reconciliation. He understood, more than any other, that a nation can only be strong if united, and that those who govern have a special responsibility in this respect.

I want to share a quote from Mandela with you. In his autobiography - Long March to Freedom - Madiba said that "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live it in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others".

South Sudan won its independence after a protracted struggle. It was bloody and cruel. The attendant sufferings are unspeakable.

Independence was to usher in a new era, the end of violence, the beginning of prosperity for a country endowed with abundant natural resources and which enjoyed the goodwill and care of the international community, as usually happens for newborns.

It was not the case. The poor governance that characterized the first steps of independence was compounded by a brutal civil war starting from December 2013. The atrocities committed are beyond imagination, and few South Sudanese were spared. These have been amply documented, including by the African Union Commission of Inquiry, headed by former President Olusegun Obasanjo.

This war has left tens of thousands dead.

It has displaced more than a third of the population, including nearly two million in neighboring countries, while close to seven million people will need assistance and protection in 2018.

It has induced a trauma that will impact present and future generations for many years.

It has witnessed and continues to experience an unusually high number of rapes and other acts of sexual violence.

Every day, new atrocities are committed, almost in general indifference, as inhumanity seems to have become the norm in South Sudan.

The economy of the country is literally in shambles.

This tragedy is a betrayal.

Betrayal of the liberation struggle and martyrdom of many South Sudanese.

Betrayal of the aspiration to peace and well-being that gave rise to independence.

Betrayal of the expectations of those who supported your struggle, in the hope that the fate of your people would be improved.

One of the first visits I made after taking office as Chairperson of the African Union Commission was to South Sudan. I was able to see first-hand the extent and depth of the trauma caused by the violence afflicting your country.

Widows, orphans, women who had suffered in their soul the atrocities of the war, and displaced persons narrated to me the long list of abuses of all kind inflicted upon them by other South Sudanese, either because they belonged to a different ethnic group or because they were suspected of supporting the other side, or simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Their trauma was so deep that they could not even shed tears or express any feelings.

Dear Brothers and Sisters of South Sudan,

Over the last four years, there have been many opportunities to put an end to this tragedy. An agreement was even concluded in August 2015.

But these opportunities were never seized. And the reasons for this are as simple as they are disheartening.

Because the political will was not there.

Because the general interest was relegated to oblivion in favor of a fierce struggle for power seen not as the exercise of a responsibility towards your people, but as the capture of all the levers of national sovereignty to serve selfish interests.

Because unscrupulous politicians and unethical warlords have made identity, ethnicity, division, rejection of the other a tool of choice to fulfill their personal ambitions.

Because the fear of the other, the hatred of the other has ended up breaking all social bonds and perverting the most basic human values.

But as the saying goes, it is never too late to do good.

The opportunity offered by IGAD to put an end to the tragedy you have inflicted on your people must be promptly and fully seized. You have at your service talented facilitators with proven track records, namely former Foreign Ministers Ramtane Lamamra of Algeria, Hanna Tetteh of Ghana and Georges Ribelo Chicoti of Angola. You can also rely on the dedication of IGAD special Envoy Ismail Wais.

To paraphrase Madiba, you must realise the second and final phase of the freedom struggle that the SPLM, at other times, symbolized, by acting in a manner that respects the right to life, the aspiration to well-being of your compatriots.

Too much time has been lost. And there is great urgency.

You cannot leave this Forum without solemnly and sincerely committing yourselves to immediately end the violence and to build on such a foundation, in order to accelerate the march towards peace and reconciliation.

Dear Brothers and Sisters of South Sudan,

This Forum could not have been held without the perseverance of IGAD and the leaders of the region. Their commitment has never been found wanting.

They have demonstrated an unswerving patience and a high sense of pedagogy.

They have, despite the difficulties inherent in such a complex peace process, maintained their unity, to help end the violence, rekindle the desire to live together and give a promising future to your country.

They have organized an infinite number of summits and missions. I doubt that they themselves have kept the count.

I must, therefore, express to them the sincere appreciation of the African Union for this dedication, but also its unwavering support, through the Peace and Security Council, the ad hoc High-Level Committee of Five, the Commission and my High Representative for South Sudan, former President Alpha Oumar Konaré.

I appeal to all the African Union Member States and the larger international community to leave no stone unturned to support the efforts of the region. IGAD's action is fully in line with the African Peace and Security Architecture, which calls for regional groupings to be the first responders for the promotion of peace in their respective areas of geographical competence. It offers the best prospects for arriving at a definitive solution to the conflict.

Supporting the quest for peace in South Sudan, therefore, means unreservedly rallying behind the initiative of the region, to signal to the South Sudanese actors that the international community is united in its demand for concrete and urgent progress towards peace.

I must also thank the neighboring countries for hosting the many South Sudanese refugees who have fled the war. Their generosity is testimony to their high sense of solidarity.

May I also pay tribute to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan - UNMISS, the United Nations agencies and humanitarian organizations for the remarkable work their staff do on a daily basis on the ground. They have strived, under the most difficult conditions, to alleviate the suffering of the South Sudanese people.

I, once again, stress the obligation of the Government and all the parties not to impede the work of UNMISS and that of the humanitarian agencies.

Dear Brothers and Sisters of South Sudan,

The coming days will be decisive. They will indicate whether, after so much needless bloodshed and extreme suffering, the South Sudanese parties have finally decided to open a new page in the tragic history of their young nation or if they continue to persist in their blindness, contempt of public good, and criminal stubbornness.

What is at stake is immense. It is important for each and every one of you to be fully aware of this in the days to come.

It can never be overemphasized: there is no military solution to the conflict.

Only dialogue, tolerance towards your fellow citizens, goodwill and generosity of spirit will pull your country out of this disaster.

The African Union, together with the other concerned members of the international community, is committed to supporting your efforts, as long as they are part of a sincere quest for peace.

At the same time, we will not hesitate, in the event of failure, to point fingers at those who have hindered the search for a solution, so that the relevant organs of our Union can take the measures that the situation demands and seek the support of the international community to that effect.

I thank you for your attention, and express the earnest hope for a successful conclusion of your deliberations.