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**STATEMENT PRESENTED BY DR GRACE KALIMUGOGO ON BEHALF OF
HER EXCELLENCY ADV. BIENCE GAWANAS,
AFRICAN UNION COMMISSIONER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

Chairman of the fifty-eighth session of the Regional Committee,
Honourable Ministers,
Director-General of WHO,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel honoured to address this gathering on behalf of Adv. Bience Gawanas, African Union Commissioner for Social Affairs. First of all, I wish to convey to you the warm greetings and the apologies of His Excellency Mr Jean Ping, Chairperson of the AU Commission, and Commissioner Gawanas herself, who were unable to be with you due to their participation in the Special Session of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government on “Consideration and Resolution of Conflicts in Africa, being held in Tripoli, Libya, from 30 to 31 August 2009”.

As you are all aware, conflicts are quite prevalent on our continent and are undermining efforts towards socioeconomic development including health, and intensifying human suffering. It is in this connection that conflict resolution and mitigation as well as promotion of peace and security are some of the priority programmes of the African Union.

Commissioner Gawanas requested me to read out the following statement on her behalf.

“I wish to thank His Excellency the President, the Government and the People of Rwanda for the offer to host the Fifty-ninth session, and for the warm welcome, hospitality and facilities that have been put at the disposal of the delegates. This show of African solidarity is commendable and a good example of promotion of regional cooperation and integration.

I would also like to thank the Chairperson of the Fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee and other members of the Bureau for their hard work in coordinating the implementation of the resolutions of that session as well as supporting preparations for the Fifty-ninth session.

Africa appreciates the role you honourable ministers play in promotion of health and development, not only in your individual countries, but also in your respective regions and indeed the whole continent.

This year is special for your Regional Committee because Africa is chairing the Roll Back Malaria Partnership, the Global Fund Governing Body, the Executive Board of the WHO as well as other bodies. This is not accidental. It is because you are doing commendable work and collaborating with each other. The AU is proud of this achievement but would like to remind you that representing Africa at international forums is an important responsibility in the name of the whole continent. That is why the process involves dialogue and consensus, and sometimes voting. Otherwise, an individual person or country would be selected randomly.

Allow me to take this opportunity to commend the WHO Regional Director for Africa and his Staff for their determination and untiring efforts to promote health in this Region, which bears the heaviest burden of disease and other poverty-related challenges. This is why, among other reasons, Africa is slowly but surely moving closer towards universal access to health services for its peoples, and to achieving the MDGs, though a lot remains to be done.

Africa also appreciates the contributions of international partners who, in one way or the other, support and facilitate national and regional efforts towards better health for all. Your cooperation, support and encouragement contribute significantly to the successes being recorded in health and development in Africa.

The AU Commission is encouraged to note that, in the Agenda of your Session, you are going to consider and address pressing public health issues which require individual and collective attention in the Africa Region and indeed the whole continent. Disease control and health promotion are areas where one country cannot succeed single-handedly. Therefore, cooperation and collaboration will improve the effectiveness of the available resources, and also promote regional integration. The AU and Regional Economic Communities are committed to supporting the implementation of the resolutions you adopt, according to their mandates and roles, and in line with the priorities of the Africa Health Strategy of the African Union.

Honourable Ministers,

You would recall that the AU Conference of Ministers of Health which involves the whole continent convened in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in May this year under the theme “*Universal Access to Quality Health Services: Improve Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health*”. Africa is strongly convinced that improving maternal and child health is fundamental to promoting socioeconomic development and is ready to keep it high on its agenda and intensify advocacy towards this end.

You will also recall that a Campaign for Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa (CARMMA) was launched, with a slogan “*Africa Cares: No Woman should Die While Giving Life*”. National Campaigns are also being launched in a number of countries, and world support in the realization of the objectives of this campaign is being expressed. I would also like to inform you of the Global Leadership coalition on Maternal Mortality which I am co-chairing with Her Excellency Mrs Sarah Brown, spouse of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Further to and in support of these efforts, African Heads of State and Government took a decision to have Maternal and Child Health as the theme of the July 2010 AU Assembly. In other words, we have the mandate from the highest level of African leadership to undertake maximum

action for the promotion of maternal and child health and, for that matter, the promotion of the health of the whole community.

I wish to also appeal for continued action towards universal access to health services through strong health systems in the context of the Africa Health Strategy, which, among others, requires predictable financing and an adequate health workforce. Although you hardly need any reminder, it is necessary to emphasize the control of communicable diseases including the big three (HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria) as well as the equally important but neglected diseases, in your strategies and programmes.

I need not remind you that the target for universal access to health services is next year, 2010. In this regard, African leaders anticipate a Review Report in 2011, on the implementation of the commitments they adopted at the 2006 Abuja Special Summit on universal Access to HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria Services.

In spite of the current economic crisis and climate change, countries need to ensure food security and good nutrition for their communities. Otherwise, the other investments in health and development will be wasted. In the same vein, Africa has to join the world in action to control the intensifying burden of noncommunicable diseases, in the framework of the “*Africa Healthy Lifestyles Day*”, which you yourselves adopted in 2008. Therefore, the AU would appreciate knowing how many countries have developed and/or are implementing related national programmes among communities, particularly youths. This is not a new strategy but, rather, a reminder to take timely preventive action and keep the public educated on the importance of adopting healthy lifestyles throughout the lifetime.

Another reminder is to stay vigilant and keep in place plans for emergency preparedness and response to disease, epidemics and disasters. Although the WHO and other stakeholders provide support and guidance, national leadership and transparency are also necessary and paramount. The new Pandemic Influenza A H1N1 has taught the world a lot, especially Africa which has many other health challenges to address.

Furthermore, the AU would also like to urge all Member States of the African Region to encourage and improve partnerships at all levels to strengthen health systems, promote access to medicines and commodities and maximize the utilization of available resources. This also includes ensuring social protection for all and, in this case, some type of health insurance and assurance, especially for vulnerable and impoverished groups. The AU also urges you to address neglected tropical diseases and mental illness more effectively. Community participation is an area that also requires sustained interest and development.

With individual and collective commitment to action at all levels, Africa’s populations will achieve universal access to health and social well-being.

With individual and collective commitment at all levels and good coordination, we will attain our goals sooner rather than later.

I thank you for your attention and wish you a fruitful Fifty-ninth session.”