



**REMARKS BY AFRICAN UNION CHAIRPERSON PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA
AT THE VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE AU BUREAU OF HEADS OF STATE AND
GOVERNMENT MEETING WITH AFRICAN BUSINESS LEADERS**

22 APRIL 2020

Good Afternoon,

Allow me to begin by welcoming all the members of the AU Bureau of the Assembly: President Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of Congo, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of the Arab Republic of Egypt, President Uhuru Kenyatta of the Republic of Kenya and President Ibrahim Keita of the Republic of Mali.

I would also like to welcome Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, President Paul Kagame of the Republic of Rwanda, President Macky Sall of the Republic of Senegal and President Emmerson Mnangagwa of the Republic of Zimbabwe.

I would further like to acknowledge the presence of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission Mr Moussa Faki Mahamat, the AU Commissioner for Trade and Industry Mr Albert Muchanga, the AU Commissioner for Economic Affairs Professor Victor Harrison and the Director of Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention Dr John Nkengasong.

I would also like to welcome the AU Special Envoys.

Most significantly, I would like to extend a word of welcome to our special guests today, our business leaders from across the continent.

I have convened this meeting with business leaders of major African companies

to brief you about the AU strategy to combat COVID-19 and seek your support for the effective and successful implementation of the strategy.

Our work is underpinned by the principles of pan-African unity, solidarity and coordination.

The private sector is a vital part of Africa's efforts to combat the coronavirus and develop continental cooperation on stimulus measures to manage the economic impact of the pandemic.

The Bureau of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government has met on two occasions since the spread of the novel coronavirus into Africa.

In these meetings, leaders acknowledged COVID-19 as an unprecedented public health disaster and that urgent action is needed to stem the tide of the virus on the continent.

We agreed on the need for a comprehensive and coordinated continental approach, and that the AU, Regional Economic Communities and all health institutions should redirect their efforts to stopping the spread of the virus.

We recognised critical role of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in the fight against communicable diseases in Africa in general and the fight against COVID-19 in particular.

The Bureau made pledges of \$4.5 million towards boosting the capacity of the Africa CDC.

The Bureau agreed to the establishment of an African COVID-19 Fund to which Member States of the Bureau initially contributed \$12.5 million as seed funding and called on all AU Member States, the international community and philanthropic entities to contribute to this Fund.

We also agreed on the need for G20 countries to provide a comprehensive stimulus package for Africa.

This would need to include deferred payments and the immediate suspension of interest payments on Africa's external public and private debt to create fiscal space for COVID-19 response measures.

Given the urgent need for medical supplies and equipment, we called for international cooperation and support while increasing local production on the continent.

In our interactions with international partners, we have strongly urged for the immediate lifting of all economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe and Sudan to allow them to adequately respond to the pandemic and save lives.

Over the last few weeks, I have held several discussions with various world leaders in my capacity as AU Chairperson.

These include UN Secretary-General Mr António Guterres, President of the World Bank Mr David Malpass, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund Ms Kristalina Georgieva, President of the European Union Commission Ms Ursula von der Leyen, Director-General of the World Health Organization Dr Tedros Gebreyesus, and several world leaders.

I have addressed letters to numerous world leaders making a strong plea for support for international assistance from our multilateral and bilateral partners for Africa's COVID-19 strategy.

I also addressed the virtual Summit of the G20 during which I emphasised the need to ensure trade and investment flows are not further disrupted by measures inconsistent with WTO rules.

I underscored the need for a comprehensive, robust economic stimulus package for Africa.

This economic injection should support both the continent's immediate humanitarian needs and place the continent on a path towards economic recovery.

I also encouraged the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank and other regional institutions to use all available instruments to help combat COVID-19 in Africa.

In general, the response has been positive with various partners making pledges, offering debt relief measures and providing concrete support in the form of medical supplies.

As part of the work to mobilise international support for Africa's efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, I have appointed Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala of Nigeria, Dr Donald Kaberuka of Rwanda, Mr Tidjane Thiam of Senegal and Mr Trevor Manuel of South Africa as Special Envoys of the African Union.

In the main, the Special Envoys are tasked with soliciting financial support for the continental effort from G20 countries, international organisations (including the UN and its respective agencies), the international donor community and the African and international business communities.

The funds mobilised by the Envoys will support of the Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Outbreak.

Last week, AU Commission Chairperson, Mr Moussa Faki Mahamat and I addressed a virtual joint meeting of the World Bank and the IMF.

During this meeting we noted that the unprecedented nature of the global shock stemming from COVID-19 calls for bold, swift and innovative measures.

We called on the international financial institutions to do 'whatever it takes' to urgently combat the virus to avoid a costlier human and economic catastrophe.

Preventing the further spread of COVID-19 remains within our control.

But only if we confront the pandemic with the full extent of the joint resources of government, civil society and the private sector.

A unified and coordinated response offers us the best possible chance of containing the outbreak.

That is why we have assembled you here today.

As some of Africa's leading business people, you are essential partners in confronting one of the defining challenges of our lifetimes.

The continent's private sector is well placed to assist in many of our most pressing challenges.

Combining our resources, we can implement the screening, testing and contact tracing programmes that have proved effective in limiting the spread of the virus.

We can shift manufacturing infrastructure towards the production of essential medical goods and we can collaborate in assuring the resilience of existing supply chains for essential products like food and pharmaceuticals.

While many of you are already active in assisting in efforts to fight the pandemic in your own countries, we must realise that only a continental intervention can provide a lasting solution.

The COVID-19 virus does not respect borders.

With porous border and active cross-border communities, an outbreak in a neighbouring country will not remain contained there for long.

Either we contain the pandemic as a continent, or we do not contain it at all.

We recognise that this is not an easy time for your companies and organisations.

While our focus must be on containing the human health crisis, this will quickly give way to a serious economic crisis.

The deep global recession that is likely to follow the pandemic will hit Africa particularly hard.

Export orders in markets like Asia and Europe will rapidly decline, while key commodity prices will face pressures that will exceed those seen after the global financial crisis more than a decade ago.

Trade distortions are likely to disrupt the smooth functioning of logistics networks, while increasing volatility in currency markets and spikes in non-payment by clients may lead to a period of prolonged economic instability that will threaten the viability of many companies.

Managing this economic crisis will require similar cooperation to that demanded by the health crisis.

To that end, I would like you to join us in the development of effective economic measures against COVID-19.

This is no ordinary moment.

This is a moment that calls for something more from all of us.

It is a moment to abandon the old ways of doing things, and to be confronted in the starkest terms with the reality of what our common humanity demands of us.

It is a moment to take action, and I hope you will all join us in doing so.

I thank you.