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**OPENING REMARKS BY ADV. BIENCE GAWANAS, AU COMMISSIONER
FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS AT THE OPENING OF THE FOURTH MEETING OF
THE AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE RIGHTS
AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD
AU CONFERENCE CENTRE, ADDIS ABABA – 24 MAY, 2004**

Your Excellency the AU Chairperson,
Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Esteemed Commissioners,
Chairperson and Members of the African Committee,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great privilege to welcome you on behalf of the AU Commission Chairperson, H.E Prof. Alpha Omar Konare and on my own behalf, to the African Union Headquarters on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the Fourth Meeting of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. I am particularly pleased that you found the time to honour the invitation and be present at this opening ceremony. I would like to recognize the Members of the African Committee who have had to travel long distances to be here. I need to make mention of the fact that since its establishment, the Committee operate under very difficult

circumstances and their achievements to date has much to do with their own personal commitment to uplift the living standard of children in the continent and to enhance their life chances.

As you are all aware the African Committee is relatively new as it was established only in July 2001 and had its inaugural meeting in May 2002. This is the fourth session of the Committee and so far the Committee has adopted its Rules of Procedure, the Guidelines for the Initial Reports to be submitted by States Parties and develop a draft Work Plan. Indeed it has a very long way to go as the challenges facing our children are multifarious.

Africa is a continent of children, adolescents and youth and their future lies in the way we address the challenges facing them today. When we talk about children what comes to mind is the rights of the child. But what are being done to safeguard these rights? Our Heads of State and Government adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which is the legal instrument on the protection of the rights of the child. The African Charter takes on board the African specificities and peculiarities applicable to the situation of the Child in Africa. However, to-date only 33 Member States out of the 53 have ratified the African Charter. I would like to encourage the African Committee to urge Member States which have not yet ratified the Charter to manifest their political will and fulfill their promises to the African child by speeding the ratification process.

Your Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The last decade witnessed a number of commitments made to improve the lot of African children and at the beginning of this 21st Century the same commitment is being renewed. If one takes the example of access to primary education for both boys and girls, this commitment was made during the World Summit for Children in 1990 and the same goal was identified in the Millennium Development Goals. Only a few countries are on the track to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 2015. The majority of African countries will be unable to meet this target. Gender disparity in school enrollment is still high and girls and women are not given the same chances to be educated.

With regard to child and infant mortality rates, they are higher on the African continent than anywhere else in the world. The number of children infected by HIV/AIDS has also multiplied and over 10 million have lost one or both parents. In defiance to the provision of the African Charter, children are still being enrolled in armed conflicts, are killed or maimed or become refugees separated from their parents and family. Due to the prevailing poverty on the continent a number of children still have to go to work to fend for themselves and their families. Others are trafficked across borders or continents. In particular, girls and women are engaged in sex trade, prostitution and pornography. All these challenges should encourage

the African Committee to redouble efforts in its task of advocacy for a better tomorrow for Africa's children.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite slow progress and serious obstacles, a number of countries have made progress in achieving some goals, such as, eradication of polio and guinea worm diseases, iodization of salt, improvement in enacting child-related laws and juvenile justice, reforms in health and education systems as well as access to primary education and access to clean water. We Africans have the needed resources to achieve the goals and meet the commitments. What is lacking is strong political will from our Leaders; and establishment of programmes that encapsulates the vision of children and youth themselves. African countries must invest in their children and youth and treat the provisions of the African Charter as state obligations in the framework of rights-based approach to child survival and development. Peace and stability must also be attained as these are prerequisites for achieving the rights of children.

The complexity and ambition of achieving the goals and their dependence on factors such as resource flows, international action to overcome HIV/AIDS and progress towards peace and stability requires the participation of all stakeholders. The International Community and partners should give priority attention to the needs of African children and work collectively to attain positive results.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, allow me to inform you that the AU Commission is in the process of finalizing its Vision and Mission for the AU in the 21st Century, together with a four-year strategic work programme. This will hopefully lead us to an integrated peaceful and prosperous Africa where African children and youth will live in harmony and peace and enjoy a better life. In implementing its programmes, the AU Commission will spare no efforts to integrate the concerns of children, the youth, women and the family. The family is an important element in relation to children. One cannot separate children from their family as one cannot exist without the other. It is imperative therefore to look at the well-being of both if meaningful achievements are to be made in realizing the goals. Let me also inform you that in July 2004, the Republic of Benin will host the African Regional celebration for the Tenth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family. This meeting will amongst others develop a mechanism and strategies for the effective follow up and monitoring of the Plan of Action.

I know that the members of the African Committee have a heavy task ahead of them as they tackle the important issues of children during this week. I want to assure them that the AU Commission will take their recommendations and decisions seriously and include them in its future programme. The AU Commission will

also continue to support the Committee and ensure that it carries out its mandate effectively. This will include the establishment of a fully functional Secretariat without which work of the Committee cannot progress.

I wish your meeting successful deliberation and thank you for //your attention.