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**STATEMENT BY H.E. ADV. BIENCE P. GAWANAS, AFRICAN UNION
COMMISSIONER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS, ON THE OCCASION OF
OPENING CEREMONY OF THE PAN-AFRICAN DANCE FESTIVAL,
ON 8 AUGUST 2004, IN KIGALI, REPUBLIC OF RWANDA**

**Director of Ceremonies,
Excellencies,
Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen!**

Allow me to express my happiness and gratitude to attend, for the first time, this historic Pan-African Dance Festival. Allow me further to bring you the fraternal greetings of H.E. Alpha Konare, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, who wanted to attend this festival but delegated me, due to his prior commitments, to attend the festivities on his behalf. I am particularly grateful that this festival is taking place in his beautiful city of Kigali, capital of the Republic of Rwanda at a time when our continent is going through dramatic changes, including a cultural re-awakening.

As you may agree with me, the Pan-African Dance Festival is one of the many Pan-African initiatives aimed at the cultural integration of our continent. You may recall that our leaders adopted the “Cultural Charter for Africa” in 1976, which provided a sound framework for promotion of Africa’s cultural riches. The Cultural Charter also shows the level of interest and commitment of our leaders to the strengthening of the cultural diversity of Africa. The principal objectives of the Cultural Charter were closely related to the overall

aims and objectives of the Organization of African Unity. I am happy to say that the African Union Commission is continuing in the proud tradition of promoting cultural integration and strongly supports Pan-African initiatives like FESPAD to promote people-to-people interaction.

Director of Ceremonies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

FESPAD certainly has strong potential to liberate the African peoples from socio-cultural conditions, which impede their development in order to recreate and maintain the sense and will for progress, the sense and will for development. Through the staging of events like FESPAD, our people can and indeed do assert their dignity and popularize their cultures. Indeed, through this festival, our people can overcome all forms of “social exclusion” by involving all talented people, particularly vulnerable groups, to express themselves through dance.

Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

The Constitutive Act of the African Union entrusts a duty and obligation on the African Union to encourage and promote cultural co-operation among the African Union Member States to strengthen African unity. It is therefore my conviction that FESPAD, indeed, has consistently played an important role in promoting a better understanding among our peoples and countries in this continent.

As you will recall, the First Pan-African Cultural Festival was held in Algiers between July 21 August 1, 1969. This was not only a grandiose meeting for cultural exchange, but also provided an opportunity for continental integration and social interaction. Ever since, similar festivals have taken place in different African countries and have served vital roles in bringing people together to share their diverse cultural riches.

Africa has tremendous material, spiritual and cultural resources. The cultural industries sector in Africa must serve as an important engine of social and economic

development. Unfortunately, this sector has not received the attention and encouragement it deserves. Moreover, access to the market for Africa's art and cultural products has been either limited or exploitative in nature. In this regard, Member States, both individually and collectively, need to provide all-rounded support and protection to the cultural industries of the continent and ensure the latter's contribution to the sustainable development of the Continent.

The Vision, Mission of the African Union and Strategic framework for the years 2004-2007 of the African Union Commission (AUC) underscore that Africa has been home to pre-historic cultural heritages and is still a repository of ancient and modern cultures. At the cultural level, one of the Mission statements of the African Union envisages, the adoption of a continent-wide agenda that provides a spring-board for Africa's cultural renaissance. Only this can "infrastructure" African civilisations and infuse an African content into modernity.

In line with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Commission of the African Union is determined to ensure that Africa's cultures are promoted, respected and enjoyed by all citizens. It is in this spirit that the AUC is committed to promote African identity, cultural plurality and diversity. The diversity of our cultures has been providing and will continue to provide us with a vast amount of strength, hope, and inspiration in the rebuilding of the new Africa, an Africa free from conflicts, hunger and poverty, a peaceful, prosperous and stable Africa

The fact that this celebration of this 4th Dance Festival is following the adoption in principle of the AUC strategic framework by the recent Summit of Heads of State and Government, is an opportune moment to assure all of you that all possible efforts will be made to ensure that culture remains high on the Commission's agenda and to support such events. Doing so will help us enjoy our cultural diversities in unity, and forge a cohesive link among our people.

As part of its programme of culture, the AU Commission will strengthen its institutional capacity will endeavor to:

- Promote cultural diversity and plurality,

- Encourage cultural exchange programmes and events
- Recognize the works of distinguished African Artists and Cultural Heroes in the form of prizes, etc.
- Encourage cultural and African studies in the continent,
- Promote cultural literacy and education among the African youth so as to build in them a sense self-confidence and Africanness, and pride in their own cultural heritages,
- Advocate the development and/or promotion of cultural policies in Member States;
- Advocate preservation of cultural heritages, the restoration of threatened cultural sites, and return of pillaged cultural properties; and
- Work closely with the Observatory of Cultural Policies in Africa and other centers of African studies.

Moreover, the role of Africa's culture in building sustainable peace and security will be enhanced and Africa's wisdom in reconciliation and conflict resolution will be restored. Culture has an important role to play in our search for African unity, reconciliation and a common humanity. Our common humanity as Africans lies in the diversity of our cultures. It is the total sum of all these cultures that makes of Africa a continent. The power of culture must be understood as enabling us all to engage with cultural diversity and to communicate with one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance. Culture can flourish and unleash its creative imagination within an enabling environment that of a culture of peace, and a culture of tolerance.

Culture is inwardly manifested in our souls, language, beliefs and value systems and can be both negative and positive. Whilst we wish to reclaim culture, we should not forget the fact that African women are part producers and preservers of Africa's cultural heritages but have also have been victims of harmful cultural practices and traditions. As the Continent is striving to build peace, democracy, justice and equity, the AU Commission will continue to discourage the harmful, negative cultural practices and to ensure that our cultures recognize the rights and dignity of all people irrespective of gender.

Culture is also outwardly manifested in our food, clothing, and arts and crafts. We decorate our houses Victorian style with the most expensive furniture yet we have the most beautiful arts and crafts that symbolise our African culture. We fill our music shelves with collections of musicians whom we do not know yet amongst us we have our own who give meaning to our existence and the creation of history. Artists speak, write, sing and create what matters to us.

And with a vision on the future of arts education, a Namibian artists said that the *for the future...*We African Namibian Artists should seek more formal training, not only to become better artists (because we can do it already), but to be better equipped with knowledge of our past. We need to do this for the sake of dialogue and to pave a sure road for our next generation.

African artists do experience a feeling of frustration and despair due to the fact that their contributions to sustainable human and economic development advancement of our economy. Yet we applaud artists for giving us knowledge and joy. We acknowledge that culture and art serves as an inspiration to many when dealing with difficult social context. We find peace in music and courage in the spoken or written word. We call it spiritual upliftment.

Finally, artists need our supporting in helping them to build their confidence and provide them with exposure and promotion. When people pursue careers in arts whether music, drama, dance and visual art, they want to be given recognition as we do with other professions.

I would be remiss if I end my speech without mentioning that culture and art are at the heart of our heritage, our democracy, our development and our humanity. I would therefore appeal to you all present here today and to all Africans elsewhere, both within the Continent and in the Diaspora, to serve as cultural ambassadors for Africa and to play their respective roles in making the dream of “African Renaissance” a living reality.

I thank you