

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) held the first ever retreat for the COMESA Committee of Elders drawn from various Member States from 29th to 2nd December 2011 to develop rules and procedures on how the Committee will function. The retreat was held in Mombasa, Kenya at the Mombasa Continental Resort.

Honourable Elders that attended the retreat include Ambassador Immaculaée Nchayo from Burundi, Ambassador Soad Shalaby from Egypt, Ambassador Gherbray Berhane from Ethiopia, Ambassador Priyay Neewoor from Mauritius, Ambassador Atem Garang Dekuek from South Sudan, Honourable Betty Bigombe from Uganda and Ambassador Simbi Veke Mubako from the Republic of Zimbabwe.

And speaking during the official opening of the retreat, Assistant Minister, in the ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kenya, Honourable Richard Onyonka commended COMESA Heads of State and Governments for establishing the Committee of Elders for the purpose of preventive diplomacy.

Mr. Onyonka said the establishment of the Committee will help solve complex and dynamic problems that the region is facing as the challenges require multiple actors and well coordinated interventions in order to be effectively addressed.

“With all the conflicts in the region, it is evident that the huge task of these distinguished members of the committee of Elders is clearly cut out,”.

“The region is looking up to you to contribute to the timely resolution of such conflicts and ensure that potential hot spots are transformed through dialogue and cooperation,” Onyonka pointed out.

The Deputy Minister said he is confident that the elected Committee of Elders will deliver as they hold various professional experiences and backgrounds in various fields like conflict prevention, mediation and diplomacy. He commended the COMESA secretariat for efforts being made in contributing to peace and security in the region and Africa as a whole.

And speaking earlier on behalf of COMESA Secretary General Mr Sindiso Ngwenya, the Director of Legal and Institutional Affairs Brian Chigawa said despite the many challenges that the Secretariat has faced financially in ensuring that the Committee of Elders perform their duties diligently and smoothly, the organisation has made efforts to send the Elders for a number of missions like the participation in the events of the African Union Panel of the Wise, which have recorded success.

“We have now been able to raise some funds through the African Peace and Security Architecture Support Programme (APSA) and we believe that these will give us the much needed boost to help us to develop mediation capacities within COMESA to make a positive and visible impact on the efforts in the region”, Mr Chigawa said.

He revealed that COMESA is cognisant of the skills that the Elders bring and also recognised the importance of availing the opportunities to put the skills into action towards supporting ongoing mediation efforts in the region.

He added that the COMESA region and Africa in general have already started benefiting from the efforts by the Committee of Elders as most of the committee members have lead various COMESA Electoral Observer missions in the region.

“In this regard we have found it prudent to have a member serve as a mission leader very much as a pre emptive strategy in the event that the elections turn violent or in an event that some crises follow elections”, the Secretary General echoed.

Mr Chigawa advised the Elders not only to develop rules of procedure but also take time to discuss some of the missions that have been undertaken with the view of improving future engagements and enhance COMESA’s role in conflict prevention and conflict resolution.