

“The COMESA region has grown stronger in the past year because of the consolidation of its internal market through the elimination of non-tariff barriers (NTBs). Of all reported NTBs, 72 percent were removed and we continue to streamline our trade facilitation programmes,” said Mr John Bande, Minister of Trade and Industry, Malawi and outgoing Chairperson of the COMESA Council of Ministers.

Speaking at the opening of the 31st meeting of the COMESA Council of Ministers lauded COMESA for its visibility on the continent and the world through its partnerships and leadership.

“Improved infrastructure in the COMESA region, the corridors initiative as well as the science, technology and innovations programme, which has harnessed knowledge and innovations, have all contributed to our region’s competitiveness,” he said.

He added that COMESA has partnered with the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and set up the Innovations Council to encourage innovation in the region.

“COMESA has also undertaken capacity building for stakeholders in several Member States to assist the business community to better understand and utilise the COMESA rules so as to enhance trade.”

Hon. Bande also congratulated the Government of Uganda for joining the FTA and informed delegates that DRC had also started the process and was awaiting ratification of the instrument. Ethiopia has also completed a study to join the FTA and will hopefully join in the coming months.

“COMESA has also been supporting the Government of South Sudan in various programmes and the accession of South Sudan has been worked on by the Bureau and the Secretariat and hopefully before the end of the summit this process will be complete,” he said.

In order to maximise ICT usage, COMESA has launched a comprehensive programme to elaborate and implement Common Market Information Systems, beginning with the Virtual Trade Facilitation System that assists tracking of cargo and vehicles in real time; and the Electronic Market Exchange System, an online marketing system between COMESA and the rest of the World, which will be the equivalent of successful, electronic market systems such as Amazon.Com and E-bay.

Hon. Bande noted further that a number of countries have complied with the requirements of the Customs Union despite expert recommendation to extend the transition period by two more years.

He added, “I call upon all of us to scale up our efforts to implement the Customs Union, so that we can be even more visible on the continental and global scene as one bloc, speaking with one voice on all critical issues that face us.”

Delegates were also informed that guidelines for external trade relations with partners had been formulated. Through customs co-operation and integration of border management programmes, it is hoped that trade will be better facilitated thereby reducing the cost of doing business.

Hon. Bande added that the Committee for Trade in Services had started negotiations among the 10 Member States that have produced final schedules of specific commitments and that the first round of negotiations had been successfully completed and a road map agreed upon. It is hoped that negotiations will be finalised in the course of next year.

Regarding intellectual property, he said that more guidelines had been produced for assisting the formulation of pro-development policies. COMESA is also in the process of mapping out the intellectual property assets that Member States possess, as a contribution to GDP and as a critical economic activity that generates wealth and jobs.

“Great strides have been made in profiling SMEs in the region, particularly in the footwear, leather and leather products and cassava processing sub-sectors. Core initiatives are in place to address constraints that SMEs face, including ongoing efforts to acquire dedicated credit lines for them in commercial banks around the region,” he added.

COMESA, in collaboration with EAC and SADC, has also established a Tripartite Project Preparation and Implementation Unit to prepare bankable projects. Infrastructure programs include the launch of the Zambia/Tanzania/Kenya (ZTK) Power Transmission Project; the Ethiopia/Kenya Power Interconnector Project; the Zimbabwe-Zambia-Botswana-Namibia (ZIZABONA) Interconnection Transmission Project; and the preparation of Spatial Infrastructure Maps containing an inventory of infrastructure facilities in the region.

Delegates were also informed that an exercise was undertaken to ascertain the extent to which Member States have implemented COMESA Treaty Provisions and Ministerial and Summit Decisions. Hon. Bande was pleased to note that overall findings indicate that most Member States are implementing their obligations, by about 70 percent.

He further informed delegates that Tripartite negotiations were on course and that the Trade Negotiation Forum had held a total of four sessions. In addition, three technical working groups have been established to deal with customs co-operation, rules of origin, and standards and NTBs.

“The FTA negotiations and negotiating principles were launched in 2012 and that a lot of work remains to be done in this area. I appeal to Member States to provide leadership in the negotiations and ensure that the Tripartite FTA is realised by 2015.”

In conclusion, Hon. Bande commended COMESA for the work well done. He however cautioned that, “The real test of our commitment to our regional integration agenda is if we faithfully implement our Treaty provisions and decisions. I will therefore end with a passionate plea to all of us to appropriately prioritise the implementation of our regional integration programmes.”