

“The aspect of peace and security amongst Member States and with our neighbours is paramount to achieving all other objectives,” said Right Honourable Prime Minister, Amama Mbabazi at the opening of the 31st COMESA Council of Ministers meeting held in Kampala, Uganda on 19 November 2012.

“The Council of Ministers forum is instrumental in the integration process as it makes the key recommendations for the authority comprising of heads of government. Further, recommendations generated by this council have, over the years, given direction to COMESA to make positive steps in the integration process,” he said.

Rt Hon. Mbabazi stated that many Member States in COMESA are still lagging behind in development because much of their time has been consumed in periods of restlessness and wars. He further noted that it is unfortunate that many times the African region is misunderstood and abused by some systems that seem to be threatened by African determination to unite and expedite business as a region.

He added that in order to achieve the aspirations of a continental integration and growth of business, the COMESA region should overcome some of the barriers that are faced by some individual Member States in achieving full integration and economic transformation including multiple stoppages along trade routes, cumbersome customs procedures, very low standards for products, and policy inconsistencies.

Delegates were challenged to harness markets beyond their own through integrating regional industry and building regional value chains. Rt Hon. Mbabazi added that, “It is through this channel that we would realise our aspirations for the Tripartite Free Trade Area of East African Community, COMESA and SADC, which brings new market opportunities to our individual countries.”

Prime Minister Mbabazi informed delegates that the Africa region was not actively trading with economic players in the world such as United States of America, China, India and the European Union. He added, “If we do not strengthen regional integration and common market strategies, we shall remain onlookers and bystanders when the rest of the world is enjoying business.”

In line with this year’s theme of enhancing intra-COMESA trade through micro, small and medium enterprise development, Prime Minister Mbabazi stated MSMEs form the main engine of growth and therefore enhancement of infrastructure development, improvement of distribution chains, financial credit intermediation, improvement on product standards and quality assurance would lead to a better business operating environment and reduce the cost of doing business in the COMESA region, thus making the region more competitive.

He further urged delegates to focus on specialisation in the areas of their comparative advantage. For instance, he stated that Uganda has the ability to feed the whole of the COMESA region if all energy is concentrated on such specialisation.

The meeting was attended by delegates from Burundi, Comoros, DR Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Swaziland, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.