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**STATEMENT BY**

**H.E CHILESHE MPUNDU KAPWEPWE - COMESA SECRETARY GENERAL**

**DURING THE OPENING OF THE 43rd MEETING OF THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEE**

**29 – 30 NOVEMBER 2022**

**Distinguished Delegates from COMESA Member States**

**Your Excellency’s Ambassadors and High Commissioners**

**Representatives of COMESA Institutions**

**Distinguished Representatives of Regional Economic Communities**

**Representatives of International Organisations**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

**All Protocols Observed**

It is my pleasure and honour to welcome you all to Lusaka, Zambia, for this 43rd Meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee. I am glad that it is now possible for us to meet physically after the advent of the COVID19 pandemic. We can now engage and create networks, an opportunity which is not readily achievable through virtual platforms. Allow me from the start to express my profound gratitude for your enduring support and commitment to COMESA’s integration agenda.

**Excellencies; Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We are meeting at a time when our economies continue to face various global and regional economic challenges. Even before full recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the global geo-political conflicts have caused disruption to supply chains for essential commodities, including agricultural inputs, food and fuel, among others. This situation calls for even more collaboration in strengthening economic and trade integration in response to the current crises.

You will recall that COMESA is now implementing the 2021-2025 MTSP adopted at last year’s Summit of Heads of State and Government. Its implementation is based on the principle of subsidiarity by key stakeholders including the COMESA Secretariat, COMESA Institutions, Member States, Cooperating Partners, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the African Union Commission (AUC). The MTSP (2021-2025) recognizes the need for effective stakeholder participation in regional integration agenda.

***Excellencies, distinguished delegates,ew***

Under market integration, we have made significant progress in implementing trade facilitation instruments, especially those focusing on automation of customs operations, upgrading of the operational efficiency of border posts, digitalization of processes and procedures of border agencies and enhanced coordination of their operations and monitoring and resolution of non-tariff barriers to trade.

We have also made major strides in simplifying administrative processes under the COMESA Free Trade Area and in the coming year we will be rolling out further innovations on electronic exchanges of documents related to the import and export function as we strengthen the COMESA digital FTA.

To increase formal small-scale cross border trade and ensure increased income for small scale traders, most of whom are women, we have implemented various policies and instruments for small-scale traders including the Simplified Trade Regime (STR), trade facilitation and human mobility border specific action plans. We intend to construct border markets at selected borders in target Member States to provide convenient trading spaces for small scale cross border traders.

***Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,***

Globalization of services provides the opportunity for developing countries and the COMESA region in particular, to find new niches where they can specialize, scale up and achieve rapid growth. I note that the path to full integration of the region is still marked by obstacles in the movement of people and services. In this regard, the Secretariat continues to build capacity of Member States in services negotiations and trade in services statistics. As you proceed with negotiations in the three additional priority services sectors, I encourage Member States who have finalized negotiations in the four priority sectors to enhance implementation of their commitments and those who have not yet finalized, to do so.

***Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen***

As an evidence-based organisation, COMESA’s research program is vibrant, and we are able to timely respond to emerging issues. This year, we held the Ninth Annual Research Forum in Cairo, Egypt, under the theme “Enhancing Business Competitiveness and Resilience to Boost Intra-COMESA Trade”. This was motivated by the need to create a sustainable recovery path by enhancing competitiveness and resilience, given the devastating effects on businesses and trade caused by COVID-19 pandemic and other socio-economic challenges. The policy implications from the research forum will support business competitiveness and resilience in the region.

As the current Chair of the Tripartite Task Force of the Tripartite Free Trade Area, COMESA continues to steer the programme towards the conclusion of negotiations on outstanding Phase I Issues on trade in goods particularly the outstanding Rules of Origin, development of trading instruments as well as implementation of the ongoing trade facilitation programmes under market integration and infrastructure pillars. It is my sincere hope that the remaining ratifications by only 3 countries, needed to reach the threshold required for the TFTA to become fully operational shall be achieved sooner rather than later.

Indeed, a fully operational Tripartite FTA is particularly important as the region forms a critical building block to the realization of the African Union regional economic integration and implementation of the AfCFTA.

**Excellencies; Ladies and Gentlemen**,

While some progress has been registered in terms of increasing agricultural productivity and production, food and nutrition insecurity remains a major challenge in the region, exacerbated by climate-induced shocks as well as conflicts. This situation urgently calls for enhanced investments in sustainable agri-food systems transformation in member states and the region.

The Secretariat is implementing initiatives to strengthen regional agri-food data and information systems, like the Regional Food Balance Sheet, reduce post-harvest losses, promote food safety, as well as enhance agriculture commodity aggregation.

***Distinguished Delegates,***

COMESA is also in the fore front of promoting private sector development with a particular focus on SMEs including women and youth entrepreneurs as an area of focus. We have in place a Regional Enterprise Competitiveness and Access to Markets Programme (RECAMP) financed by the European Union. RECAMP aims to contribute towards deepening of COMESA regional integration through increasing competitiveness and market access of private sector in regional and global value chains focusing on Horticulture, Agro-processing and Leather industry.

***Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,***

The role of infrastructure in economic development cannot be overemphasized. Availability of infrastructure facilities and services as well as efficiency of such services help to increase returns on investment by reducing production costs and improving transition efficiency. COMESA’s transport infrastructure programmes are based on a holistic corridor-based approach to infrastructure development and anchored on three key pillars namely development of priority regional physical infrastructure, policy and regulatory harmonization and facilitation. COMESA has developed transport facilitation instruments that have been implemented with marked success in some corridors.

In the energy sector, most Member States have developed policies and regulations that are compliant with COMESA model energy framework developed in 2007.

COMESA continues to implement ICT programmes. Most Member States have domesticated the model ICT policy guidelines and regulations which has led to opening of the ICT sector to competition.

**Excellencies; Ladies and Gentlemen,**

COMESA recognizes the need for the effective participation of men, women, and youth in its regional integration agenda for inclusive and sustainable development and ensure prosperity for all. It is well documented that any improvement along dimensions of equality and empowerment spill over into positive benefits for communities and nations and achievement of developmental goals. In this regard, Secretariat continued to provide support to various programmes and projects to strengthen gender mainstreaming, and support initiatives on women and youth empowerment such as the small-scale cross border trade initiatives, SMEs support initiatives, gender statistics initiatives, promotion of the digital information and networking platform for women.

In-line with the recommendations of the Council of Ministers on establishing the Committee on Health, I am pleased to report that the first meeting of the Ministers of Health was held in June 2022. Their report and decisions of the Ministers will be presented to your meeting for noting and to the Council of Ministers for endorsement. Key points to note from this report are on the development of the pharmaceutical sector in the region, and the support to Secretariat to make the health desk operational.

**Excellencies; Ladies and Gentlemen**,

Your meeting will receive various Ministerial reports for noting. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that regionally agreed programmes are effectively implemented at the national level. You will also receive, for your consideration, reports of various COMESA institutions who continue to play a significant role in advancing COMESA’s regional integration role.

Allow me to express gratitude to our co-operating partners who generously provide resources to finance COMESA’s programmes. They will have an opportunity to make their statements.

With these remarks, I look forward to fruitful deliberations and recommendations that aim to uphold COMESA’s aims and objectives.

Thank you for your kind attention.