



**STATEMENT TO BE DELIVERED BY
HONOURABLE CHRISTOPHER B. YALUMA, MP
GUEST OF HONOUR
DURING THE OPENING SESSION
OF THE 41st MEETING OF THE COMESA
INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEE
TO BE CONDUCTED VIA VIDEO CONFERENCING ON**

23RD – 24TH NOVEMBER 2020

The Chairperson of the Intergovernmental Committee;
Senior Government Officials;
The Secretary General of COMESA, H.E Chileshe Kapwepwe;
Co-operating Partners;
Representatives from International Organizations;
Representatives from Regional Economic Communities;
Representatives from COMESA Institutions;
Distinguished Delegates,
Members of the Press; and
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I thank you all for your participation at this 41st Meeting of the COMESA Inter-governmental Committee held under the COMESA 2020 theme **“Towards Digital Economic Integration”**

For the first time in the history of COMESA, this meeting is taking place through Video Conferencing, an unusual circumstances owing to the COVID-19 Pandemic, which has changed how we interact under what is now termed the “new normal.”

The COVID-19 Pandemic is paramount for discussion at this meeting, as it has changed our usual way of doing business. I have been informed that the impact of the pandemic on regional integration and in particular the movement of goods and services across the region will constitute key discussion points during this meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Owing to travel restrictions brought on by the pandemic, the region has witnessed a dramatic decline and destabilization in domestic, regional and international trade, requiring the employment of comprehensive economic recovery strategies.

It has been reported that in 2019, COMESA's export volumes and import volumes declined compared to 2018. COVID-19 has hit hard countries that are sources of major imports and export destinations for the COMESA region and this has negative impact not only on availability of supplies, but also on prices that have risen sharply in some instances. Sadly, it is anticipated that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will further weaken the performance of these markets.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Notwithstanding the immense challenges brought on by the pandemic, it is worth noting that the region remains committed to forge ahead in implementing regional programmes and initiatives aimed at facilitating socio-economic transformation of our region.

I believe as a region, we are committed towards guaranteeing the health of our citizens against COVID-19, specifically the cross border traders through, reforming our health care systems and establishing an environment in which there is seamless flow trade in goods and services to support economic growth.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In line with the COMESA theme “**Towards Digital Economic Integration,**” and in facilitating the new normal, the COMESA Secretariat developed and launched an online platform for exchanging information on availability of essential products within the COMESA Member States. You may wish to recall that this was officially launched in July 2020.

I have been reliability informed that work is ongoing to operationalize the platform. I therefore urge the Secretariat to expedite the finalization of the required processes that would facilitate operationalization of this online platform, as it is critical for attainment of desired results with respect to trade in the region in this COVID era.

Similarly, in the spirit of information sharing and continuous learning, I have been reliably informed that COMESA has used contemporary communication channels to disseminate information. The publication of periodical bulletins and newsletters regarding trade related measures that COMESA has put in place have been continuously shared.

These initiatives have enhanced access to quick and reliable information on the COMESA regional integration agenda as the region conducts business during the pandemic. I therefore commend the Secretariat for coming up with these initiatives and encourage them develop other innovations that will continue to foster the cause of the region.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to share what Zambia has done to understand and mitigate the effects of COVID-19 Pandemic at national level. The Ministry of Commerce,

Trade and Industry undertook a Business Survey and a Tourism Sector Survey to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on enterprises in Zambia.

The major finding from the studies was that Covid-19 has adversely affected business operations in Zambia with about 71% of the total responding enterprises indicating that they were partially closed while 14% were totally closed.

Regarding the tourism sector, the study showed that 63.7% of all enterprise supply chains were affected by Covid-19. This development indicates that the measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus such as lockdowns by our trading partners affected the supply chain of imports.

It is encouraging to note however, that despite the many challenges being faced by the business community, the surveys reported that the majority of enterprises are determined to continue their operations by adhering to the new normal requirement during the COVID-19 outbreak and beyond.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In terms of striking a balance between safety and facilitating trade, the Government of the Republic of Zambia has been promoting the use of electronic platforms firstly to reduce the amount of time spent at the border and secondly to limit the face to face human contact and exchange of physical cash. Some of the measures that are being implemented in this regard at various ports of entry include;

- (i) Processing of exports at inland ports as opposed to border stations to reduce congestion at the border;

- (ii) Heightened awareness to importers, exporters and clearing agents to undertake Pre-arrival processing (Pre-Registration and Pre-Clearance) and use of electronic Payment options available with all Commercial Banks; and
- (iii) Extension of working hours in special cases to clear any increased traffic volumes to avoid congestion;

Given the information I have provided on Zambia, I wish to encourage the region to continue working towards enhanced trade with us. Similarly, I believe this meeting will serve as a platform through which Member States will learn from each other, recent measures under implementation in respective countries, for the purpose of deepening regional integration.

Allow me to take this opportunity to applaud the champions of regional integration, our Member States with unwavering support of our Cooperating Partners and a hardworking Secretariat, for the execution of our regional programmes that directly respond to the realities we face.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your meeting, the intergovernmental Committee, is a very important one as it a key organ of our organization as it considers critical concerns pertaining to Budget and Administrative as well as Trade and Customs matters among others.

I am aware of some of the outstanding issues to be discussed pertaining to the organizational structure of COMESA Secretariat, Member State contributions as well as audit of COMESA Secretariat.

I, therefore, urge this meeting to provide the necessary guidance to address these issues and endeavor to have consensus, for the sake of progress, on matters that will contribute to the attainment of our common goals. This is necessary for growth and sustainability of our organization.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing, I do not wish to take up much time delivering a statement when I am fully aware that you have a number of issues under discussion and consideration.

I thank you once again for attending this meeting. I must say that your attendance is a clear indication of your commitment towards COMESA's integration agenda even in difficult times such as this one.

I wish you all a fruitful meeting even as you deliberate on issues for this meeting and plan for our future as a region, having taken stock of the opportunities and challenges ahead of us.

I thank you.