

UN Secretary General urges African leaders to focus efforts on peace, development.

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Addis Ababa, 02 February 2009 (ECA) – The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. BAN Ki-moon today told African leaders that recurrent regional conflicts tend to distract the continent from urgent challenges such as the international economic and financial crisis, climate change and high food prices.

Addressing a session of the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa , Ethiopia , the Secretary-General made a passionate appeal for the body to continue its concerted efforts to seek peaceful solutions to conflicts, which have beset the continent for decades.

“The global economic crisis is unprecedented in scale and scope. It is erasing jobs and undermining with alarming speed the hard-won gains of recent years. For a majority of people, particularly those in developing countries the most painful and terrifying phase of the crisis has only just begun,” Mr. BAN Ki-moon warned.

He said that in Africa , its negative effects would not only be on growth, trade and financial flows, the fight against poverty but that there is the likelihood of official development assistance (ODA) being reduced.

The Secretary-General also recalled that since taking up the helm at the UN, he has kept his pledge to keep “African issues on the front burner of the international agenda.”

Focusing on the continuing wars in the region, the Secretary-General outlined some of the on-going conflicts – notably in Sudan , the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia , explaining the role being played by the UN to prevent conflict and preserve peace.

Nevertheless, Africa is not without hope and progress, he added, citing the recent election of Sheik Sharif as the new president of Somalia , as well as discussions that brought warring factions to the table in Democratic Republic of Congo and in Zimbabwe .

Still, more needs to be done. The Secretary-General promised the UN would take the lead in building up the African Union Mission to Somalia . He also promised to accelerate the deployment of the UN/African Union Hybrid Operation (UNAMID) forces in Darfur .

In West Africa , he noted with satisfaction the reduction in the number of destructive and internecine conflicts, as well as several peaceful, democratic transfers of power.

The Secretary General noted with appreciation the fact that the African Union has made it clear that it will not accept unconstitutional changes of power such as recently took place in Guinea and Mauritania .

“I welcome and encourage this strong, principled and predictable approach and commend the African Union for the adoption of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance”, he said.

He however expressed concerned about recent developments in Madagascar and urged, “that all parties address their differences peacefully and through existing constitutional mechanisms”.

Furthermore, the Secretary-General noted, “drug trafficking is becoming a major challenge to security and governance in West Africa, as traffickers are taking advantage of porous borders, inadequate security and limited national capacity.” He said that the UN is working closely with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to help provide better security.

“But these efforts have only just begun”, he warned.

The Secretary-General, who has just returned from the Middle East where he took active part in negotiating a cease-fire in the Gaza conflict, said that the African Union Summit comes at a critical period in Africa 's search for development in greater peace and security.

“The lesson to be drawn from recent conflict in Gaza is that prevention is better than cure. It also underscores the importance of working towards sustainable political solutions,” he said.

The Secretary-General was the guest of the AU Summit, which this year is focused on infrastructure and development. Referring

to the theme of the Summit , the Secretary General underscored the importance of infrastructural development for economic growth and social progress.

“Africa needs good roads, schools and hospitals; as well as reliable and efficient water services, electricity grids and telecom networks; while information and communications technologies must also be a bigger part of Africa's future”, he explained.

“Given the large number of small and landlocked countries, and shared resource belts, regional approaches to providing infrastructure are essential. There is great benefit to be derived from the economies of scale that cross-border cooperation brings”, he added.

The summit ends Tuesday 3 February 2009.

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