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**First Meeting of the African Regional Conference  
on Science and Technology**

**Statement**

**by**

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**Commission for Africa**

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**Addis Ababa**

**Mr. Chairman,  
Honourable Ministers,  
Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished Experts,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**It is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome you all to Addis Ababa for this first meeting of the African Regional Conference on Science and Technology. Let me, from the outset, express my gratitude to your governments and organizations for their support to the work of the Commission. I am confident that this solidarity with the Commission and its Secretariat will continue in the future.**

**Africa today represents the world's most serious development challenge. Notwithstanding international concern and strong efforts in individual countries to promote economic and social development, two decades of slow or negative growth, declining personal incomes, declining investment ratios and uneven implementation of economic reforms have bred pessimism. Civil strife continues to absorb vitally needed financial resources and political energies in many countries. Key institutions are often weak and private markets imperfect. Government capacity is hampered by poor incentives for civil servants and public enterprises and by weak public sector management in general.**

**Africa -- and particularly sub-Saharan Africa -- is highly dependent on concessional economic assistance. Foreign assistance supplies some 10 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP, almost half of its foreign exchange receipts and most of its investment**

expenditure. The fall in aid in real terms over the past two years and the bleak prospects for growing or even sustained levels of aid in the future create an additional development challenge.

Against this backdrop, many African countries are implementing economic and social reforms, improving governance and economic management, and creating an enabling environment for the mobilization of resources, domestic and external. A large number of countries have initiated structural reforms, accompanied by a change in the nature of state intervention in the economy, and by shrinking budget deficits. In 1994, eight African countries achieved or exceeded the 6 per cent annual growth target set under the United Nations' New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s. GDP grew steadily in some countries, particularly those that had created an enabling environment to stimulate private sector development, with significant gains in the agricultural and industrial sectors.

Reflecting on the overall situation of progress yet severe challenges, Africa's top political leadership has increasingly focused primarily on national and regional responsibilities and how the international community can best support development as defined by Africa. The most recent and perhaps the most significant of these initiatives was the adoption on 28 March 1995, during an extraordinary session of the OAU Council of Ministers in Cairo, of Relaunching Africa's Economic and Social Development: The Cairo Agenda for Action, which was subsequently adopted in the June

1995 Summit of the African Heads of State and Government in Addis Ababa. The Cairo Agenda reaffirmed that Africa's development is first and foremost the responsibility of the governments and people of Africa themselves. It also affirmed that priority must now be given to the implementation of the strategies and programmes for the development of African countries which have been adopted at the national, regional and continental levels.

The world outside Africa today is one of explosive expansion in world trade and financial interdependence, and, in some regions, dramatic increases in living standards in just a single generation as a result of sound macro-economic management and steady investment in people. Technological advances and the information revolution reshaping the global economy offer all developing countries the possibilities of faster rates of economic and social development than currently developed countries experienced. Global advances offer opportunities for the Africa region, through technological "leapfrogging" and by drawing on the economic development experience of successful countries, to make the 21st century one of great and accelerating progress.

In this context, the role of science and technology is foremost to upgrade the value of Africa's raw materials and resources, transforming them into products that can compete in the world's market, and generate the wealth required for socio-economic development.

To achieve this, governments need to review their present science and technology policies and machineries in line with the new international context characterized by a much greater role of the private sector, a new trade and investment regime and by a shift from academic research to greater application of science and technology to meet the basic needs of the populations, in view of the limitation in resources. Governments need to strengthen their technological capacity through human resources development, creation and support of efficient institutional structures and the provision of adequate resources. They should also institute an incentive regime that can motivate scientists and technologists to devote themselves to local development, and that can attract both local and foreign direct investment for technology development and application.

More specifically, there should be new modes of training and skills acquisition using modern informatics technology, industrial and business establishments. Graduates should be better prepared to apply their skills and generate self employment to face the challenges posed by the increasing number of unemployed. Special incentives should be applied to encourage industries and business establishments to undertake such training activities in the spirit of partnership. At the same time, information technology driven by the convergence of telecommunications, computers, satellites and fibre optics, is crucial for the knowledge-intensive economy of the days ahead. Hence, adequate attention needs to be given to informatics and the information highway that can revolutionize the lives of even

the poorest segments of our society. As I have already stated, such innovations, including those of frontier science and technologies like biotechnologies and new materials technologies, offer Africa the possibilities of leapfrogging some stages of development.

The promotion of biotechnology as an efficient tool, along with appropriate pre- and post-harvest technologies accessible to the rural farmers, remain a priority for the region. Since women account for 70 to 80 per cent of household food production, their role and capacity in applying relevant science and technology can no more be ignored.

By bringing together policy and decision-makers to discuss policies, strategies and programmes, this regional Conference, which will be meeting every two years, should greatly assist Africa to extricate itself from its technological underdevelopment, and guide the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in the formulation and implementation of its work programme on science and technology.

The role of ECA is to assist governments, through studies and policy analysis, training, seminars and conferences, increase the impact of science and technology. Through its advisory services, ECA seeks to influence science and technology policy and to assist governments in the programming and implementation of specific projects. As a regional arm of the United Nations, ECA will continue to play a lead role in bringing the socio-economic aspect of science and technology to the forefront of national, subregional and regional.

In carrying out these functions, we will work closely with the Organization of African Unity, the African Development Bank, and with sister organizations of the United Nations System as well as other bilateral and multilateral institutions. Through such partnership, we will endeavour to ensure the optimal use of resources, avoid duplication of efforts and achieve a stronger impact of science and technology in meeting the challenges of the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am confident that your deliberations will be fruitful, and that your recommendations will form the basis for the effective utilization of science and technology in the reduction of poverty, and the advancement of social development in our member States.

I thank you for your attention.