

**SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY PAUL KAGAME, PRESIDENT OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF RWANDA, AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 10<sup>TH</sup>  
SUMMIT OF THE COMESA HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT**

**Kigali, Hotel Intercontinental, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2005**

Chairman of the COMESA Authority, Your Excellency Yoweri Kaguta Museveni,  
President of the Republic of Uganda;

Your Majesty King Mswati III of the Kingdom of Swaziland;

Your Excellencies Heads of State and Government;

Your Royal Highness Inkhosikati, and Madam First Ladies;

The President of the Senate;

The President of the Chamber of Deputies;

Right Honourable Prime Minister;

The President of the Supreme Court;

Honourable Ministers;

The Secretary General of COMESA;

US Deputy Secretary of State;

European Union Commissioner;

Your Excellencies,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Special Representatives to COMESA;

Your Excellencies Heads of Delegations;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure, and it is, indeed, a privilege to welcome you to Kigali and Rwanda, also fondly known as the Country of a Thousand Hills. The people of Rwanda extend their warm welcome to you all and are eager to show you their friendship and hospitality.

As you walk the streets of Kigali or visit our countryside, don't be surprised if people greet you in Kinyarwanda.

It is an expression of their warmth and love.

They appreciate that in the last few years, COMESA has chosen Kigali as a venue for its important meetings.

They take this as a sign of solidarity with them and a vote of confidence in the progress we have made in our national reconstruction and reconciliation efforts after the 1994 genocide in our country.

We shall endeavour to meet your expectations, and where we can, surpass them.

Mr. Chairman;  
Your Majesty;  
Excellencies;  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

This Summit offers us, the torchbearers of the COMESA ideal, another opportunity to return to COMESA's objectives.

It comes after the Business Summit, which was launched here only three days ago because we recognise the cardinal role the private sector plays in our development process.

Ten years after its birth, we need to revisit the major milestones, and refocus on the bold steps we need to take to complete COMESA's economic, political, and security agenda.

In particular, we need to work towards the complete integration of our region and produce a definitive timetable for a complete Free Trade Area and a clear roadmap to a Customs Union, in the understanding that only result-oriented programmes will help us to pursue collectively a development agenda in which our people are the ultimate beneficiaries.

For, despite some differences in our countries' histories, cultures, and political and economic institutions, COMESA is an embodiment of better mutual understanding, and an instrument for achieving development, peace, and stability for the benefit of all member states.

The greatest paradox of our time is that while Africa has been endowed with enormous ecological, natural, and human resources, the people of our continent still suffer from hunger, famine, poverty, preventable diseases, illiteracy and other ills. How can we accept that in this day and age, with such unprecedented scientific and technological advances, our people die of starvation and preventable diseases?

Do we need any reminding that the entire Gross Domestic Product of Sub-Saharan Africa is less than 2% of World Domestic Product?

And yet, whether we like it or not, we are part of the global economy because globalisation is here, and it is here to stay.

The advances in telecommunication and transport have condensed time and space, and are slowly disintegrating economic and political boundaries.

Globalisation is challenging the very basis of the sole state as an economic and political unit. And we should position ourselves to harness benefits accruing from it. That is why I believe that we Africans must know where we want to go, and what it takes to get there. In a sense, we must swim or sink! And sinking is not an option that we can contemplate.

Neither is there time to waste, because of two main reasons: First, we cannot begin to reap the benefits of globalisation as long as our economies, in individual countries, are still small and vulnerable to domestic and external shocks.

Second, the only way we can integrate into the world markets is by taking the route of regional integration and strengthening regional blocs, such as COMESA.

I subscribe to the view that our salvation lies primarily in the promotion of intra-regional trade and positioning ourselves as a cohesive regional economic bloc in the world market.

Mr. Chairman;  
Your Majesty;  
Excellencies;  
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Such arguments in favour of regional integration have been articulated and we all agree that they are impeccable. But that is not enough.

The success of COMESA will depend on our ability to consciously take collective action and make it an effective vehicle to bring about better living standards of our people. We need to pool our resources and create a more stable and predictable environment that is essential for our private sector to flourish. This may entail making short-term sacrifices, and giving COMESA as much priority as domestic considerations.

It will also necessitate making a resolute effort to establish ambitious, but feasible timetables for necessary reforms, evaluate the resources required, and work towards great institutional and economic policy convergence.

Here, I have in mind areas such as the removal of tariff barriers and tariff harmonisation, legal and regulatory reform, rationalisation of the payment system, investment incentives, tax system harmonisation, and labour market reform.

Ten years on, we should not still be discussing the protocol of free movement of people.

Without free movement of people in our region, we limit the transfer of skills, labour and capital, which are all key factors of production.

Similarly, we should expedite the process of ratifying the COMESA fund in order to provide for the smooth establishment of the COMESA Customs Union.

These are all challenges that call for solutions.

And as I said, the initial stage of integration may involve sacrifices, but we must accept to swallow the bitter pill now because the ultimate goal is a win-win situation.

Of course economic openness is not enough for the COMESA region to achieve our goals.

We will continue to need sound macro-economic policies, transparency and accountability, and generally good governance in the public and private sectors.

Mr. Chairman;  
Your Majesty;  
Excellencies;  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

The issue of peace, security, and stability in the COMESA region and on the rest of our continent is of cardinal importance.

Clearly peace and security are fundamental prerequisites for sustained economic integration and development.

Interestingly, wisdom dictates that trading partners rarely become foes.

With time, the deepening of trade among COMESA member states will suffocate any likely potential for hostilities between them.

Besides, we cannot join and benefit from the international trading system if conflicts and insecurity in the region deter us from concentrating on our comparative advantage, and if they create uncertainty that is anathema to direct foreign investment.

Before I conclude, let me say that the challenges we face are not insurmountable and I detect a renewed sense of purpose.

Although COMESA has seen the withdrawal of 5 members in the last 5 years, we now have 11 members already trading without any tariff barriers and it is quite advanced in preparations for the Economic Partnership Agreements that will no doubt benefit member states.

We must remember that the European Union, with its current membership of 25 countries, was not reached overnight.

Europe had to undergo a process of varying membership, rationalisation and groupings akin to what we are experiencing in Africa.

The often-cited problem of overlapping multiple agreements arising from multiple memberships of various regional groupings is real, but there is a remedy to it.

That is if we agree to a plan to synchronise the Common External Tariff of each member country, with a view to harmonising our current strategies to ultimately form one large trading bloc, as an initial stage of establishing the African Economic Community by 2025.

This is also in keeping with NEPAD's ideal of creating regional synergies which emphasise inclusive national economic processes, underpinned by the enforcement of internationally accepted codes and standards.

Lastly, let me say that although COMESA is primarily African and trade amongst us has a lot to offer, COMESA will not succeed in isolation.

That is why we need to promote partnership with our development partners and other trading partners, not least because we need a forum for dialogue, where we can exchange ideas and remove obstacles that deter our trade to flourish. As we have often said, only trade will deliver the emancipation of our people.

The COMESA region gives us an opportunity to accelerate economic growth and reduce poverty through the completion of the Free Trade Area and the establishment of the Customs Union.

At this juncture, let me acknowledge the trade opportunities and facilities that we have obtained from the US and the European Union, like AGOA and Everything-but-Arms (EBA), and the on-going Economic Partnership Agreement negotiations, which have the potential to widen market access to our products.

Mr. Chairman;  
Your Majesty;  
Excellencies;  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

Once again, on behalf of the Rwandan people and on my own behalf, I would like to thank you for choosing Kigali as the venue for the 10<sup>th</sup> COMESA Summit of Heads of State and Government, as well as the Second First Ladies Roundtable.

I sincerely hope that you will find your stay enjoyable and that we will reach another milestone in Kigali, in the interest of the COMESA region and our people.

Thank you for your attention.