African Union - UNAIDS high-level side event on the margins of the 73rd UN General Assembly, 24 September 2018

“Towards intensified AU-UN cooperation for the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence and protecting the health and the rights of women and children in humanitarian settings”

Opening Speech
Ambassador Smail Chergui
Commissioner for Peace and Security
African Union Commission
Your Excellency, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, President of Central Africa Republic,

Honourable Michael Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS and Chair of H6 Partnership,

Distinguished Delegates,

Invited Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, and on my own behalf, it is my honour to welcome you to this high-level dialogue to discuss an extremely important topic that concerns all of us. You will all agree with me that eliminating sexual and gender-based violence and protecting the health and the rights of women and children in humanitarian settings is our shared responsibility. As a result, this needs to be at the heart of all humanitarian, development and peace and security efforts. In this regard, the African Union Commission would like to thank UNAIDS and the H6 partnership for their continued efforts in ensuring that these issues are at the top of the agenda of our institutions and Member States and for our partnership in organising this very important side event today.

Your Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are all aware that women and children bear the brunt of conflicts and we have also observed high incidence of HIV and AIDS among girls and women, high population of refugee and internally displaced women, limited access of girls to education, and marriages of young girls. We have also noted other harmful traditional practices that violate the dignity and human rights of young girls. In situations of armed conflict and other humanitarian crisis, sexual and gender based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse have even more severe consequences on the health and dignity of women and girls.
Noting the above, and recognizing the most likely linkage between sexual exploitation and abuse in conflict situations and transmission of HIV, the need for our institutions and Member States to continuously enhance and strengthen implementation of our zero-tolerance stance on any act of sexual exploitation and abuse becomes crucial. This is why the African Union and the United Nations take any act of sexual exploitation and abuse by our mission personnel extremely seriously.

As a Commission, we are guided by our policy organs, including the AU Peace and Security Council which, in the Communique of its 659th meeting, stresses the need for ensuring full protection of women and girls in countries affected by conflicts and crises. Importantly also, we are happy that our Member States are in full support of our work on these issues. This includes through facilitating preventive measures such as training on minimum standards as well as in the imposition of stiff penalties against perpetrators of sexual violence. These penalties are applied across the board, regardless of the status or rank of our personnel to ensure effective response and remedial actions if violations occur – in line with the same Communique of the 659th meeting of the PSC.

Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

African Union’s efforts to eliminate all forms of sexual and gender-based violence are guided by our zero-tolerance policy and principle on sexual exploitation and abuse by our staff and Peace Support Operations (PSOs) personnel. This policy and principle has also been reflected in a number of Communiqués of the AU Peace and Security Council, as well as in the Conduct and Discipline Policy in AU PSO and the Policy on Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in AU PSOs.

Additionally, African Union’s efforts on the linkages between sexual exploitation and abuse in conflict situations and transmission of HIV are underpinned by the Africa Health Strategy 2016-2030 and 2016-2030 Maputo
Plan of Action. These guiding documents calls on Member States, civil society, the private sector and multi-sectoral development partners to join forces and operationalize the continental policy framework on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls.

As per our commitment, we will continue working towards eliminating sexual and gender-based violence and protecting the health and the rights of women and children in humanitarian settings. In this regard, we believe that the partnership between the African Union and United Nations provides for an opportunity to reinforce our efforts and employ joint and comprehensive approaches in responding to the needs of vulnerable populations in crisis situations. As result, we are happy that the Joint UN - AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security that the Chairperson of the AU Commission and UN Secretary General signed on 19 April 2017 also underlines the need for the two organizations to collaborate and reinforce each other in a complementary manner.

The joint AU-UN framework and efforts between the AU and UN is also underpinned by the importance of compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law. The UN Security Council has also reiterated the importance of this partnership, in particular in its resolutions 2320 and 2378, adopted in 2016 and 2017 respectively. These resolutions equally reiterated the importance of transparency, accountability and respect of international norms, including taking adequate measures to prevent and combat impunity for sexual exploitation and abuse.

Notwithstanding, there is a need to dedicate adequate resources to raise awareness among Member States on these issues. Additionally, we should ensure that effective response and remedial mechanisms, including access to adequate health care, are in place for victims of sexual violence in conflict and humanitarian settings. In this regard, it is important to recognize the role that Peace Support Operations personnel could play in ensuring effective preventive and adequate responses and remedial actions as may be required.
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to commend all African leaders for the efforts to eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse and transmission of HIV and AIDS from the African continent. Nevertheless, more needs to be done in order to reach our goal. Thus, it is important that we all work together to continue enhancing our efforts. It is only through such joint efforts that we will be able to achieve the common objective of ensuring that the human rights of women are promoted. This in-turn will also enable us to better protect women and girls from violations, including health related consequences.

I Thank you.