OPENING STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR SMAÏL CHERGUI, COMMISIONER FOR PEACE AND SECURITY,

TO THE 3rd RETREAT OF THE PAN-AFRICAN NETWORK OF THE WISE (PanWise)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

16-17 November 2015
Your Excellencies former Heads of State and Statesmen,  
Honourable Members of the Panel of the Wise and Friends of the Panel of the Wise,  
Distinguished representatives of the Regional Economic Communities,  
Representatives from the African Ombudsmen and Mediators Association (AOMA),  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my immense pleasure to welcome you to the Headquarters of the African Union Commission, for the 3rd Retreat of the Pan-African Network of the Wise (PanWise), titled “SILENCING THE GUNS BY 2020: THE PANAfrican NETWORK OF THE WISE AND THE PROMOTION OF CULTURES OF PEACE IN AFRICA”.

Allow me to begin by thanking all of you for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us in Addis Ababa for this important occasion. I also recognize the usual support of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD).

This Retreat is organized in furtherance of the decision of the Assembly of the Union, of 26 May 2013, to establish and operationalize the Pan-African Network of the Wise (PanWise). PanWise is a continental network created to promote a more concerted and inclusive approach to preventive diplomacy, mediation and peaceful resolution of disputes in the context of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). As defined, PanWise, therefore, counts as its core members a distinguished group of personalities with a solid track record in promoting peaceful resolution of disputes, drawn from the AU Panel of the Wise and Friends of the Panel of the Wise, the Council of Elders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Panel of Elders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Committee of Elders of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern
Africa (COMESA), as well as the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the East African Community (EAC).

Furthermore, and in line with the mandate and spirit of PanWise, the continental network also includes, as integral members, representatives from “national peace infrastructures” engaged in prevention and mediation activities at national and sub-national levels – such as national ombudsmen, local councils of elders, religious leaders, women, the youth, the African Insider Mediators Platform (AIMP), and selected institutions, so as to promote a functional inclusion of so-called “bottom-up approaches” to conflict prevention and mediation.

Furthermore, such an “Africa-wide-web” of mediators should ultimately be tasked with the responsibility of developing further the use of traditional, home-grown approaches and tools for building peace through dialogue, strengthening social cohesion, promoting the respect of human rights, ensuring the equality between women and men, supporting democratic participation, developing tolerance and solidarity, and empowering and engaging young people, women and men. PanWise has the potential to become a unique platform to promote reflection involving all stakeholders at all levels to review the actions already undertaken, questioning the fundamental concepts – often a source of misunderstanding and manipulation – and contribute to the identification of possible innovative preventive actions and for the promotion of a culture of peace in Africa.

**Your Excellencies, Honourable guests,**

The promotion of a culture of peace is central to PanWise as it requires a deliberate investment in building peace in the minds of men and women – indeed, investing in the people, institutions and structures at local level that directly focus on preventing violence and managing
Conflict is a way to strengthen the resilience of states. It is now internationally recognized that investing in civic organizations is essential to promoting values of non-violence, social inclusion, intercultural and intergenerational dialogue at national, sub-regional and continental levels.

The role of these actors at the local and national levels is undisputed. However, dialogue, conciliation, mediation and facilitation processes may be constrained without collaboration and engagement in complementary efforts at the sub-regional and continental levels. By establishing these vertical connections, the AU and the RECs through PanWise acknowledge national and sub-national level actors as key drivers and complementary mechanisms of a culture of peace, conflict prevention and mediation.

Establishing and strengthening what one could term national and sub-national “peace infrastructures” should be approached as a process-driven intervention that recognizes values; should create national ownership through broad-based, multi-stakeholder consultations and consensus-building; and nurture, not overtake or undermine, what exists at the community level. It should be acknowledged that a single all-encompassing model does not exist and that peace infrastructures are highly situation and context specific.

Cognizant of the need for coordination and harmonization of efforts in the context of APSA and the increasingly prominent role of the AU and the REC’s in the maintenance of peace, the above institutions have since their inception gradually and systematically taken concrete steps towards strengthening their relations and enhancing their capacity to collectively address the scourge of conflicts on the African continent. These efforts have taken the forms of joint missions conducted under the PanWise
umbrella, as examples of the network’s work in practice. While regional panels have attended AU Panel of the Wise meetings for some time now, the pre-election assessment and fact-finding missions jointly conducted are of special importance. Examples include the preventive diplomacy/mediation missions undertaken by the AU Panel of the Wise with COMESA to Egypt and Kenya; the joint mission undertaken by the AU Panel of the Wise, COMESA, ECCAS, SADC and ICGLR to the DRC; and joint missions with ECOWAS to Ghana, Senegal and Sierra Leone, etc.

Moreover, and in partnership with the UNDP, in September 2013, the AU through the Panel convened two regional consultations with RECs, namely the ECOWAS and SADC, with the participation of their respective Member States. The objectives of the consultations were to explore the modalities for strengthening peaceful and resilient development in the countries within the sub-regions through building and strengthening national capacities for peace and sustainable development, and establishing linkages and synergies between the national, regional, and continental efforts.

At both meetings, and in line with the PanWise operationalization guidelines and Action Plan, Member States of the ECOWAS and SADC regions (thirty countries in total) agreed that national initiatives, structures and institutions for sustaining peace and development must be established and linked to continental and sub-regional initiatives. Member States emphasized that these national initiatives need to be strengthened to better address national and sub-national peace and development challenges, as well as created where they do not exist at the moment. It was further noted that building on what already exists is a key principle for ensuring the durability and long-term sustainability of national peace infrastructures.
Specifically, Member States of ECOWAS and SADC agreed to reinvigorate and integrate indigenous and traditional methods of healing, reconciliation, and alternative dispute resolution into local and national efforts; undertake national conversations/dialogues and analyses (with the aim of consolidating and strengthening existing capacities); obtain and share best practices and experiences from the region; further implement the results of these national conversations; and submit the results of these exercises and the resulting plans and programs to their national parliaments, relevant RECs and the AU.

It was agreed that the AU, RECs and the Member States of ECOWAS and SADC, along with other stakeholders, would regularly meet to enable experience-sharing, peer-learning, and mutual support, under the umbrella of the PanWise, with technical support from relevant partners.

**Excellencies, dear friends**

This Retreat accordingly aims to:

i. Examine current challenges and emerging threats to peace in Africa, including reflecting on the opportunities for the promotion of a culture of peace in line with the Charter for the African Renaissance and the African Union’s Agenda 2063;

ii. Build a shared understanding of the synergistic potential of peacebuilding and mediation actors at different levels and reflect on the capacities, needs and contributions of actors at these levels. These include ombudsmen, but also, where relevant, elders, religious leaders, traditional authorities, insider mediators, local capacities for peace, community based organizations, civil society
organizations, the youth, the education (academics and researchers) and artistic community, the media, the private sector;

iii. Reflect on practical strategies to maximize the role and potential of education, indigenous knowledge and culture, artistic creation, performance arts and communication as key activities towards a sustainable culture of peace;

iv. Discuss the wide variety of customary and contemporary mediative approaches and the implications that differences in approach have for effective mediation practices.

v. Discuss in concrete terms the involvement of national actors in the PanWise, including a Process of Accreditation, Code of Conduct, Reporting Obligations and standardizing Capacities applicable to these national and local actors and the role of PanWise in supporting, nurturing and developing National Infrastructures for Peace;

The next two days have been planned to enable frank and open discussions as well as concrete contributions on all these issues. You will see from your programme that we have allowed for plenary sessions as well as smaller parallel clusters and break-out sessions.

It is my sincere hope that this Retreat will give us an opportunity to reflect on our experiences and draw lessons that will allow us to strengthen our efforts in “Silencing the Guns” and promoting a culture of peace on our continent through the operationalization and expansion of the Pan-African Network of the Wise.

I declare this Retreat open and wish you fruitful deliberation.

I thank you.