PRESS RELEASE

A few days before the celebration of the International Day of Peace, as part of the Year of Peace and Security in Africa, the Commission releases the following editorial from the Chairperson of the Commission, Jean Ping

WHAT WILL YOU DO TO MAKE PEACE HAPPEN?

On September 21, the African continent will join with the rest of the world to celebrate the International Day of Peace (Peace Day). Every year since 1982, that day has provided a rallying point for the United Nations and its member states, but also for civil society, private sector and individuals, to join forces to advance global peace.

This year, September 21 will have a special meaning to Africans, for it will be the culmination of the 2010 Year of Peace and Security, declared during the AU Special Session on the Consideration and Resolution of Conflicts in Africa, held in Tripoli on August 31, 2009. On that occasion, African Heads of State and Government outlined their collective commitment to bring peace to the continent:

“...We are determined to deal once and for all with the scourge of conflicts and violence on our continent, acknowledging our shortcomings and errors, committing our resources and our best people, and missing no opportunity to push forward the agenda of conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction. We, as leaders, simply cannot bequeath the burden of conflicts to the next generation of Africans.”

Peace Day is the symbolic focus of this commitment. While peace cannot be achieved in a day, September 21 nevertheless affords Africans the opportunity to celebrate notable successes in the realm of peace-building and to put peace in practice through a collective, cooperative moment of unity. A cessation of hostilities on Peace Day will allow humanitarian agencies to dispense life-saving medicines and provide inoculations and other humanitarian assistance to communities which would otherwise be inaccessible.

More importantly, a successful Peace Day will create hope for a better future for the entire continent.

The activities of a single day can energize Africans from all walks of life, helping to generate a widespread grassroots peace movement across the continent. And that upswelling of demand for peace, and actions to make peace happen, may indeed help fulfil our common promise of a conflict-free Africa.
September 21 is an opportunity for Africa’s leaders to renew the pledge they made in Tripoli just over a year ago and to show, by personal example, their commitment to peace. It is also a practical demonstration of the partnership between the African Union and the United Nations, the two organizations that jointly shoulder the greater burden of making peace, protecting civilians, and providing security for humanitarian assistance across Africa. That partnership also encompasses Africa’s Regional Economic Communities, which have often taken the lead in responding to political crisis and armed conflict in diverse parts of Africa.

Our accelerated efforts to make peace happen in Africa in 2010 and beyond come on the back of some undeniable advances. Violent conflicts have significantly decreased since the mid-90s, thanks to a common resolve among African leaders and support from the United Nations and other international partners.

Yet conflict remains a painful reality in different parts of the continent, and it is not just combatants who suffer. In fact, more people, especially women and children, die from the consequences of conflict than from direct conflict-related violence. The economic toll is also devastating. Estimates have pointed to a combined economic loss of around $300bn since 1990 by African countries affected by conflict. With an average annual loss of around $18bn as a result of wars, civil wars, and insurgencies, armed conflict shrinks a nation’s economy on average by 15 per cent according to an estimate considered conservative. Conflict is the greatest impediment to sustainable development in Africa.

Addressing the scourge of conflict is, therefore, critical to the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Put simply, if we cannot bring conflict to an end, we will not eliminate poverty. Peace sustains development. Development sustains peace.

For these reasons, the African Union, in partnership with the United Nations and other actors, is determined to leave no stone unturned to end conflict and sustain peace in Africa. As Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the respected Indian diplomat, once stated: ‘the more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war’.

We have already notched up some important achievements working together. Nothing illustrates this partnership better than the unprecedented AU-UN hybrid operation deployed in the Darfur region of the Sudan and the assistance extended by the United Nations to the AU peace support mission in Somalia. Elsewhere on the continent, the AU and the UN are combining their respective comparative advantages to resolve conflicts, overcome their legacies and build new bridges between communities and countries that once saw themselves as irreconcilable enemies. Beyond the immediate task of grappling with current crises, the AU and UN are also engaged in both the critical, yet often invisible, work of preventing the occurrence of conflicts in the first place, and long-term efforts to address the underlying causes of violence and conflicts. Furthermore, the two organisations are working closely together to build strong institutions and tools to provide the continent with the capacity required to meet the complex challenges facing it in the area of peace and security.
This renewed partnership would not have been possible without the dynamism and leadership demonstrated by the African Union. Ever since its creation, less than a decade ago, the AU has been proactively working towards the resolution of existing crises and the prevention of conflicts, placing particular emphasis on the entrenchment of democracy, rule of law, governance and human rights.

Although the commitment of political leaders is important, the pursuit of peace should not only be the preserve of national governments and international organisations. It must also be built from below, by the efforts of ordinary women and men, civil society and private sector: we all have a responsibility in achieving peace; we all stand to gain from the achievement of peace.

September 21 is an opportunity to involve everyone of us in doing something to make peace happen. We will pray for peace, not only to pray but to involve religious leaders in the search for peace. We will organize concerts, not only to lift our spirits, but also because our musicians can inspire us to work for peace. We will involve models and role models, sportsmen and women, the high and not-so-high, the rich and the not-so-rich, the young and the elderly. Our Peace Day will be a practical step towards the total mobilization of our people for peace.

September 21 will bring the call for peace out of the chambers of the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council, and give voice to the most vulnerable, those who bear the brunt of violence and are often left scarred physically and emotionally. In turn, their cry for the prevention of violence, including that against women and children, for protection against such a threat, and for participation across the board in building a better society and, in particular, in peacemaking efforts, will echo back to those august Councils, and demand that the highest decision-makers make peace and security a reality, not only a slogan. The people’s cry for peace will convince those at war that the commitment to peace cannot be reversed, and that the guns must be permanently silenced, the refugee camps emptied by people voluntarily returning home, and the classrooms filled by children determined to learn and fulfil their limitless potential.

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