OPENING STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR BANKOLE ADEOYE, COMMISSIONER FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS, PEACE AND SECURITY, AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION TO THE CONTINENTAL SEMINAR FOR ARTISTS ON ARTS, CULTURE, AND HERITAGE AS LEVERS FOR SILENCING THE GUNS IN AFRICA 14-16 DECEMBER, 2021, ACCRA

PROTOCOLS:

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me, on behalf of the AUC, to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Ghana for the legendary hospitality accorded to us since our arrival. We also sincerely thank H.E. President Nana Akufo-Ado for his demonstrable commitment to the promotion of AU Initiatives and Agendas. Let me also acknowledge the presence of our participants for accepting AU’s invitation. The AU’s silencing the guns initiative encompasses our collective partnership in the pursuit of good governance, democracy, protection of human rights, peace, security, and stability in Africa. This year’s AU theme, which focuses on African Arts, Culture, and Heritage, reminds us about the transformative power of the Arts Series in the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts in Africa.

Culture is a powerful force that bridges across differences, it brings people together, and underpins social cohesion, peace, and security. Across the African continent, the importance of arts, culture, and heritage in conflict and post-conflict settings, in reconciliation and forgiveness, in post-conflict reconstruction and development, and in conflict prevention is increasingly being recognized. The cultural heritage has helped to prevent conflict in divided communities by creating trust, encouraging empathy, raising awareness, and inspiring tolerance around societal differences. Art in the form of music in such situations is usually vibrant. It is a way of looking beyond the pain and suffering that surrounds people.
On the other hand, cultural heritage, as an important part of human identity, plays an important role in inducing tolerance, acceptance, and understanding of cultural differences. Further, cultural engagement helps in transforming conflict by changing perceptions, that is, how people view each other and the whole process of societal healing, which is a cornerstone of conflict transformation. These can be perceived as building blocks contributing to sustainable peace, stability, and democratic development. In many African countries, music has been powerfully used to dissipate inter-ethnic conflict, and transmit positive messages of good citizenship and civic responsibility. In effect, African music proved instrumental to the collapse of apartheid in South Africa.

Despite this unifying function, it is important to note that, artistic expressions are not always positive. Arts and culture can be used to cure the wounds of war as much as they can be used as political weapons to address ethnic and belief differences, grievances, and identity misinterpretations. In some instances, artistic expressions have been used to incite violence, hate speech, and hate crimes, as well as reports of attacks on artists – both online and offline. Often rooted in a fear of the other, these acts are governed by exclusion and a rejection of diversity. This negative exploitation of culture has contributed to more protracted crises and relapses into conflict, as well as the denial of human rights, including cultural rights. This raises important questions that needed deeper probing: Who owns the artistic process? Whose voice do they claim to represent? Whose agenda do they intend to implement? And whose notion of peace do they seek to achieve?

These seemingly contradictory aspects of Arts, Culture, and Heritage, warrant the need to deepen understanding of their specific role or status in contemporary peace-making and peacebuilding efforts in Africa. Promoting cultural harmony should
also be on the negotiating table to build trust during mediation and dialogue to resolve conflicts. As it is increasingly accepted that sustainable peace is now more broad-based and encompasses multiple dimensions, arts, culture, and heritage must be part of broader contemporary peacebuilding strategies and agendas.

Therefore, there is a need for fresh thinking that encourages more dialogue between members of the cultural and artistic sector and representatives of other sectors (youth, women, civil society organizations, and other relevant stakeholders) working in the areas of peacebuilding and conflict prevention. It is also crucial to maximize communication and collaboration with policymakers so that arts, culture, and heritage can assume a more prominent role in pre-and post-conflict nation-building contexts, alongside security, governance, and development. Since cultural differences are so often at the heart of the conflict, cultural practices need to be at the heart of conflict resolution as well.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that, culture is integral to who we are and where we come from. From heritage to creative expression, culture contributes to identity, belonging, and meaning. As a resource for community vitality, well-being, and expression, it shapes peaceful societies through the recognition of and respect for the diversity of cultures and freedom of expression. The protection of culture is not only a cultural issue; it has become a security imperative. The culture of peace should remain premised on the embodiment of the globally acclaimed richness of African Arts, Culture and Heritage. The future of Africa relies on the promotion and preservation of its culture as a peace-dividends conveyor.

I wish you fruitful deliberations over the next two days.

Thank you for your kind attention.