



Monday, 01 February 2021

Dear Fellow South African,

South Africa's term as Chair of the African Union comes to an end later this week. As we reflect on our year in this position, I am reminded of the old saying that 'in crisis lies opportunity'.

Ours was a baptism of fire, having assumed the Chairship in the same month the first case of coronavirus was reported on the continent.

The priorities we outlined for our term, among them furthering peace and security, the economic empowerment of women and deepening economic integration, had to be immediately and dramatically reoriented to deal with the pandemic.

Our most pressing task was to steer the focus of the African Union to addressing the worst global emergency in over a century.

COVID-19 has affected all the countries on the continent. To date there are more than 3.5 million confirmed cases in Africa, and more than 88,000 people have died.

It has been a health, humanitarian, social and economic crisis for African countries, most of whom are inadequately resourced to manage a health emergency of this size.

And yet, as unprecedented as the nature of the pandemic has been, so too has been the manner in which African countries have come together to fight it.

In doing so we have drawn principally on the continent's own expertise, capabilities and institutions such as the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC).

Africa did not sit by passively as the true extent and danger of the pandemic unfurled. From the earliest days of the pandemic and led by the AU, we swiftly developed a continental response strategy, driven by the Africa CDC and regional task forces.

We realised that every country on the continent would be severely affected by the pandemic. Most would not have the resources needed to meet the public health challenge or to protect their economies. We therefore agreed as African countries to appoint several prominent Africans as special envoys, who would engage with international funders and multilateral institutions to make the case for financial support and debt relief on Africa's behalf.

In this way, working as a one continent, we were able to achieve debt relief for many countries and financial assistance towards our COVID response and economic recovery.

But much as African countries went to the international community for support, we first helped ourselves – establishing and capitalising a continental COVID-19 Response Fund.

For every partnership forged with better-resourced nations and the international donor community, we set up our own innovative and ground-breaking African Medical Supplies Platform to enable all African countries to quickly secure personal protective equipment and other medical supplies in an equitable, affordable manner.

And now that the COVID-19 vaccine is available, we have worked as a collective to ensure that the continent gets its fair share, working with the COVAX Facility and led by our own African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team. Vaccine rollout has already commenced on the continent and we aspire to have the majority of the continent's population vaccinated by the end of 2021 to achieve herd immunity.

We have acted as one to protect health, people and livelihoods on the continent. In doing so, we have demonstrated our capacity for self-reliance and our ability to be the drivers of our own development.

Despite the dominance of COVID-19, we have still managed to make advances in several of our key priorities.

During our term, the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was finally launched, heralding a new era of intra-African trade and economic integration.

Even under the difficult conditions posed by the pandemic, the continent has pushed ahead with towards the goal of 'silencing the guns' on the continent. The AU has been actively involved in negotiations around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, in achieving a ceasefire in Libya and promoting peace in South Sudan.

Another focus of our term has been on the economic empowerment of women, which we will continue to champion even beyond our term and throughout the Decade of African Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion to 2030.

As we hand over the baton to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) we leave this preeminent continental body in a position of greater strength.

South Africa will continue to play its part to foster integration on the continent, and support the incoming Chair and the organisation in its efforts to meet the aspirations of the AU's Agenda 2063.

When the Organisation for African Unity was founded in 1963, Member States planted the seeds of cooperation and solidarity in pursuit of a better life for all the peoples of Africa.

They affirmed that African unity was paramount if the welfare and wellbeing of Africa's people was to be assured.

History bears witness that these seeds have not always fallen on fertile ground, and over the years the continental unity project has experienced many hurdles and false starts.

But the grave threat posed by this pandemic has galvanised African countries to collective action.

In the hot-house of the COVID-19 crisis, the seeds of unity and cooperation planted by our pioneering forebears have come to life and flourished.

This time of great trial and difficulty has been among the AU's finest hours.

we are honoured to have been given the opportunity to lead the organisation through this period, when it practically demonstrated the true meaning of the words African Union.

This is an accomplishment for which all the citizens of our continent Africa should feel proud and from which they should draw encouragement.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cyril Ramaphosa".