



REGIONAL INTEGRATION IS AFRICA'S PREMIER POLITICAL, ECONOMIC CHALLENGE: MELES

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Addis Ababa, Mar.04 (ENA)--Regional integration is the premier political and economic challenge that Africans are facing today, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said here on Monday.

In his opening address to the third African Development Forum (ADF III), Prime Minister Meles said all successful efforts at regional integration have been underpinned by political will, not merely expressed in documents, but by practical commitment in carrying out obligations assumed by governments and political leaders.

"If Africa is to succeed in this exercise (regional integration), this is a lesson that we can not ignore," Meles noted.

Meles said Ethiopia would continue to be committed to regional integration and African unity, not only because of its dedication to the unity of the continent, but also because of its conviction that regional integration is in its interest.

Meles stressed that peace building and peace making should continue to be an integral part of the integration agenda. "We realize that without peace all our dreams for development and integration will remain unfulfilled," he said.

Meles said that the scarcity of human and infrastructural capital that need to form the foundation for effective integration would make the process so complex and so forbiddingly an uphill struggle.

Though Africa's experience might be unique, there are experiences and benchmarks that apply to all, Meles said, adding that there are those who have succeeded in regional integration. "How they have made it, are experiences that we need to draw lessons from".

Meles has also underlined the need to avoid pitfalls and take advantage of available opportunities. "All this requires not only commitment, but also a clear and informed vision as well as realistically designed priorities," he said.

The Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), Amara Essy said on the occasion that Africa has the capacity to form a union that would enable it to tackle its problems.

A lot of measures have been taken to ensure that Africa is truly prepared to move towards regional integration, the secretary general said.

The African Union is of capital importance for Africa's development, Essy said, adding economic integration constitutes the greatest share of regional integration.

The Secretary General underlined the need for the participation of all stakeholders to ensure the realization of the African Union. "We can not build the AU with out the youth, the women, the private sector and the civil society," he added.

"I lay trust in all the stakeholders that have gathered here, and you all have a task to accomplish to realize the African Union," he said.

The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, (ECA), K. Y. Amoako on his part stressed the need for rationalizing Africa's current system which he said is "too complex, too duplicative and requires too much political energy and money for what is being produced".

"Efforts to rationalize the current plethora of integration institutions will not succeed unless there is solid political backing," Amoako said.

Amoako underlined the need to devise new ways of conceptualizing and financing regional integration, which, he said, "calculates not only what it will cost to integrate, but also what it will actually cost if we do not move to effective political and economic integration".

The ADF III has brought together a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including government officials, parliamentarians, businesses, financial institutions, labor, civil society, international organizations and the Diaspora.