



## **AFRICA PEOPLES SHOULD BE ONE**

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Dr Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, New Vision (Kampala), Opinion, Thursday 7 march 2002  
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THE ADF has become an important agenda-setting forum on Pan African issues in the last three years since it started under the leadership Dr K. Y. Amoako. The first ADF was on information and technology in Africa. It yielded a number of ongoing initiatives to bridge the digital divide between Africa and the rest of the world and other programmes that are equipping African organisations, institutions and individuals with the skills to deal with the 'white man's juju' both regionally and nationally.

The second ADF was on the theme of HIV/AIDS in Africa. It generated a number of pro active regional and international initiatives to combat the AIDS pandemic on our continent. It contributed to a process of truth telling about the pandemic and gave opportunity for African countries to move away from shame and denial to confronting the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a continental problem with serious negative implications for our development and social progress.

It does not matter who and why it started. The truth is that millions of Africans are infected, being infected or will be infected.

This week's ADF is by far the most ambitious initiative of the ECA. Its broad theme is "Defining priorities for regional integration". In plain language, it means how can we make the new African Union work?

One of the innovative aspects of the ADF process is the range of stake holders involved in it: governments, African and non-African multilateral agencies, civil society groups, NGOs, the business sector, etc. The programme always included a direct interface between these groups and the highest level policy makers in Africa including heads of state.

This week, four African heads of state are expected to participate in the ADF interface. The host head of government, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and President Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast.

All African countries are represented both by their governments and different non-governmental organisations and institutions including academics, youth leaders, women groups, trade unions, business groups, and also media groups from within and outside Africa. There is even an online debate about the issues being discussed at the ADF for those interested to join in.

The fact that such a meeting is taking place and so many Africans are attending it for me represents something: we are concerned about our continent and have not given up hope on our peoples.

There are a number of concerns being raised by both the governmental and non governmental participants. They include the speed of the union initiative, contradictory economic and political relations between African countries and within countries. But most of all there is a deep skepticism about the political will and commitment of African leaders.

While I share many of these concerns and several others I think we should separate the objective from the process. Those who argue that African peoples were not consulted have a point but they should also remember that international treaties and multilateral agreements are often drawn up by states. When the Universal Declaration for Human Rights was drawn up, all of Africa (excepting Liberia and Ethiopia) were under colonialist tutelage. When we obtained independence we did not refuse to accede to the treaty simply because we were not free people when it was agreed. Similarly, we have to look at the African Union in terms of the over all objectives whatever one's reservations about the process. There are more opportunities for African people to be very active in the union than it was possible in OAU. What is important is for different stakeholders to find proactive points of entry and engagement with the African Union.

The civil society groups and NGOs attending the ADF 3 are looking for ways and means of institutionalising such entry points. The Pan Africanist ideals of one Africa, one people, one government are no longer dreams today they are a precondition for our survival. It does not make sense that Africans find it more difficult to travel around Africa yet non-Africans especially Europeans and Americans can just enter any African country anytime they wish without any hinderance. It is even more ridiculous because most African states do not even have diplomatic representation in a majority of African states. You need a visa to enter the country but the country cannot even afford an embassy where you are!

Regional integration and Pan Africanism is no longer a dream but pure common sense. Set our people free and get off their backs. Whatever the contradictions and challenges, Africa must unite.