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AFRICA CANNOT DEVELOP UNLESS WOMEN EXERCISE REAL POWER, SAYS

SECRETARY-GENERAL IN MESSAGE TO ADDIS ABABA SESSION

Following is Secretary-General Kofi Annan's message to the African Union session on gender in Addis Ababa, 6 July:

In the past year alone, Africa's women have made great strides forward. I congratulate the African Union (AU) on electing five women out of a total of 10 commissioners. This reflects growing recognition that gender balance is crucial to all areas of the AU's work. I also commend African States for adopting the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa to the African Charter on Human Rights, as well as including gender considerations in the protocol that establishes the Peace and Security Council. And of course, I warmly congratulate Gertrude Mongella -- a long-standing friend of the United Nations -- on her election as the first President of the Pan-African Parliament.

Increasingly, Africans understand that their continent cannot develop unless its women exercise real power -- in the home, in the local community, in the nation, and in the Union itself. Indeed, the New Partnership for Africa's Development has set women's advancement, along with the eradication of poverty, as its two key long-term objectives. But let us be clear: inextricably linked with both of those is the need to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS. The epidemic is proving a devastating obstacle to development, while taking an increasing and terrifying toll on Africa's women. But women also have an indispensable part to play in all aspects of the struggle against it.

No less important is recognition of the role of women in the work for peace and security. Time and again, women have played a constructive and essential part in peace processes. They are gradually finding a place at the negotiating table, in the implementation of peace agreements, in post-conflict rehabilitation, reconstruction and disarmament. It is high time they were included in those processes in a more formalized way, at all levels and at all stages.

I deplore the fact that sexual and gender-based violence continues to be used as a weapon of war in African conflicts. In parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in the Darfur region of Sudan, gender-based violence has reached almost epidemic proportions. Every effort must be made to halt this odious practice, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

I urge African States to do everything they can to translate into reality the objectives of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security -- and to do so without delay, since implementation of this landmark document will be reviewed by the Council in October this year.

I hope that this gathering will bring fresh impetus and resolve to Africa's efforts for the advancement of women, and help you build further on your achievements so far. The United Nations will continue to do all it can to support you in that mission.

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