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AFRICAN THINK TANK RESPONSE TO AFRICAN UNION SUMMIT

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- 4) **Dr. Ahmed calls on Australia to show leadership in aid crisis.**

African Think Tank chair calls on African leaders to show unity, responsibility

The 12th annual meeting of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union is to be held from the 1st to the 3rd of February in Ethiopia. The theme this year is 'Infrastructure Development in Africa'.

Dr. Berhan Ahmed, chairman of the African Think Tank and Victorian Australian of the year 2008, called upon African leaders to take responsibility for conditions in their countries.

"The leaders of African States must accept responsibility for problems in Africa," Dr. Ahmed said today. "They must embrace the need for openness, change, and development of their administrations, infrastructure and education.

"While it is true that First World government policies and companies have contributed to problems in Africa, many governments are mired in factionalism and refuse to accept their part in building accountable administrations. Some rogue states are little more than bandits that prey on their peoples.

"This is a great time, a time of possibility for the whole world. The First World is acknowledging its mistakes and is holding out the hand of friendship and aid to help resolve problems. This is a time when real progress and change is possible if African leaders show leadership, and work together and with the International community to solve the problems of all their peoples. This time can be used to make true and long-lasting changes, a firm base for the improvement of the lives of all the peoples of the world. This is a time for action, for the leaders of the African nations to show unity and to work on substantial change. This great opportunity must not be frittered away."

Visit of Australia's foreign minister to pre-summit meeting welcomed

Prior to the summit, Australia's foreign minister, the Hon. Stephen Smith, attended the Foreign Ministers (Executive Council) meeting of the African Union.

"The ties between Africa and Australia grow stronger every day," said Dr. Ahmed. "This is an excellent time to build on these links. At a time when our traditional trading partnerships are under stress, the strongly developing economies in Africa are a source of excellent future

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partnerships with Australia. This is the first time an Australian minister has attended such a summit in Africa. This shows the positive and forward-thinking economic policies of the Rudd government.”

Australia’s increasing ties to Africa build prosperity for both; migrants a source of ties and future trade.

According to figures released by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, over 300 Australian companies are involved in partnerships in Africa, with investments of up to \$20 billion, and nearly 9000 African students are studying at Australian Universities.

“The migrant communities in Australia are a source of future trade and exchange links with Africa,” Dr. Ahmed also said today. “When young people are supported in learning and understanding their background culture, they gain strength of identity which allows them to really identify with Australia. They become bi-cultural Australians who can act as a bridge between Africa and Australia, a resource for developing links and understanding between Australia and Africa. This is the way forward to build and develop Australia’s prosperity in the future.”

Urgent need for aid in crisis-hit areas; opportunity for Australia to claim its position as international leadership

The Minister also visited some of Australia’s aid projects in Africa. According to recent reports, the World Food Program is going to be forced to halve the amount of food aid it is able to give to the seven million people in Zimbabwe who are dependent on it. The ration is soon to be reduced to 600 calories a day – an amount that means certain death by starvation within a few months.

Food handouts in Congo and in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan have already been reduced to this figure. Aid agencies have no choice. In the last two years, basic food prices have doubled, while funding to aid agencies has fallen significantly in real terms.

“We now have absolutely critical situations at the bottom, middle, and at the top of the African continent (Zimbabwe, Congo, Eritrea/Somalia/Sudan),” Dr. Ahmed said. “Each of these crises affects neighboring countries. Every failure of infrastructure increases the export of disease, malnutrition, and instability to the rest of Africa.”

“Yet the amount needed to keep these people alive is less than a hundredth of a percent of the amounts now being spent on the world financial crisis. The amount needed to keep the program at current levels of support is \$67 million. For a quarter of what is being spent on the new Melbourne Stadium, Australia could save millions of people from slow starvation.”

“This is a moment when the Australian government can act to show international leadership, a great opportunity to build our world stature. This is not only a time when millions of lives could be saved. It is also a time when Australia could take a leading place in world affairs and build a strong and certain foundation for prosperity in the future.”

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