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OPENING REMARKS

BY

H.E MRS. JULIA DOLLY JOINER

COMMISSIONER FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

ON THE OCCASION OF

THE SECOND CONSULTATIVE MEETING ON
AFRICAN UNION HUMAN RIGHTS MEMORIAL

AT THE AUC HEADQUARTERS

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA: 4 NOVEMBER 2011

Mr. Chairperson
Colleague, Commissioner for Peace and Security
Excellencies Ambassadors/ Permanent Representatives of Rwanda, Ethiopia,
Ghana, Senegal, and South Africa
Distinguished Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Chairperson of the Commission, I heartily welcome you to this very significant Consultative Seminar on the Human Rights Memorial for the AU Commission. I am pleased to know that some of you have come from very distant places, to bring your contributions and expertise to this discussion on a subject of critical importance that the respect for and protection of Human Rights represents. Where Human Rights have been violated, we must ensure that impunity should not be tolerated and above all, that the memory of the victims remains constantly with us to serve as a reminder that never again shall we allow such horrendous calamities, caused by man against man to happen.

Gross Human Rights abuses have taken place in almost every part of the world. Yet the genocide that was unleashed in Rwanda some seventeen years ago today stands as one of the darkest episodes of modern times. The Rwanda Genocide was preventable and the world could have done much more to avert such an unfortunate occurrence. In the intervening period since this horrendous crime was committed in 1994, the international community and indeed the African Union have adopted a number of declarations and instruments aimed at preventing and punishing perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

The importance the AU attaches to matters of Human Rights is also amply demonstrated not only by the establishment of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, but also by the creation of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. This is in addition to the role played by other organs of the African Union to promote and protect Human and Peoples' Rights on the Continent and the adoption of various instruments aimed at ensuring that Human Rights abuses are prevented and perpetrators punished. Within this context, the development of a Human Rights Strategy for Africa, -adopted in April 2011 could also be cited as a reflection of the increased commitment and attention being given by the continental organization towards the promotion and protection of Human and Peoples' Rights in Africa.

Permit me to recall that in his Report on the 'Year of Peace and Security' (YoPS) in Africa, to the 14th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union, held in Addis Ababa from 31st January to 2nd February 2010, the Chairperson of the Commission indicated, among other activities planned to celebrate the YoPS, that the Commission would "initiate steps to build a permanent memorial to the victims of Human Rights violations, including genocide, within the African Union Headquarters". The Assembly expressed its support for the envisaged activities. In his Progress Report on the implementation of Decision Assembly/AU/Dec.275 (XIV) on the Year of Peace and Security in Africa, the

Chairperson furthermore indicated that the Commission had already initiated a reflection on the form that such a memorial could take.

No doubt, continued consultations on the matter will proceed as we look towards 2012 which was declared the "Year of Shared Values" by the Assembly of the African Union at its 16th Session in January 2011.

Dear Participants,

You are here today to take that resolve to another level. The timing of this meeting cannot be overstated. It is coming at a time when the construction of the new AU Headquarters building is at an advanced stage.

The site of the construction has its own significance, as it is the former central prison, known as "Alem Bekagn", which was the location of the 1936 Graziani Massacre, the execution of sixty ministers in the Government of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, and the imprisonment, torture and execution of thousands of Ethiopians during the days of the Derg Regime, especially the Red Terror atrocities of 1977-78 and thereafter. The site is therefore of historic significance for Ethiopia and we see it as our responsibility to honor the memory of the victims of such heinous acts at the Headquarters of the African Union.

The construction of Human Rights memorials is a matter of national and international import. These memorials take many forms as indicated by the Chairperson in his Report mentioned earlier. Some consist of the physical preservation of former prisons such as the well-known Robben Island in South Africa or the former slave dungeons and castles in Ghana and the fortress at Gorée Island in Senegal. Some are mausoleums or preserved sites of massacres, sometimes with human remains left untouched. Others are specially constructed museums and libraries, such as the Apartheid Museum or the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre.

There are also other creative means of preserving the memory of past atrocities through public artworks and places of contemplation and prayer. Generally, these memorials serve many purposes, including paying respect to those who perished, preserving historical sites and artifacts, educating the present and upcoming generations about the violations perpetrated and sufferings endured and providing a location for events such as lectures and exhibitions.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Establishing the African Union Memorial for the victims and survivors of Human Rights abuses and genocides in the African continent, provides an important opportunity. It is a reminder and recognition of a dark past; an affirmation of the resolve to respect the dignity of humankind; and a commitment to prevent future recurrence of such acts.

The African Union has a particular role in promoting all aspects of peace on the continent, including conflict prevention, peacebuilding, peacekeeping and conflict

mediation. The AU increasingly emphasizes the intimate linkages between human rights and peacebuilding. The consultation should therefore equally explore how the Memorial can illustrate, build upon and promote these linkages.

Let me, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, express the profound gratitude of the Commission to the Japanese Government and Justice Africa in collaboration with the Heinrich Boll Stiftung Foundation, for providing the funding that has enabled us to organize this consultative gathering.

I wish you successful deliberations and thank you for your kind attention.