**Closing remarks by Deputy President Paul Mashatile at the African Continental Free Trade Area Business Forum, Cape Town International Convention Centre, 18 April 2023.**

Programme Director,

Your Excellency, President Mahammadou Issoufou, former President of the Niger and AfCFTA Champion,

Your Excellency, Dr. Monique Nsanzabaganwa, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission,

Your Excellency, Minister Ahmed Ali Bazi, representing the Chairperson of the African Union, His Excellency, President Azali Assoumani, President of the Union of Comoros,

Your Excellency, Wamkele Mene, Secretary General of the AfCFTA Secretariat,

Prof Benedict Orama, President and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Afreximbank,

Ambassadors and distinguished dignitaries,

Business leaders, CEOs, members of Boards and associations,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am honoured to speak to you at the conclusion of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Business Forum 2023. The Forum has been billed as Africa’s biggest business event to promote private sector participation in the acceleration of the implementation of the AfCFTA.

We would like to thank the AfCFTA Secretariat for hosting the Forum in South Africa. For those of you who come from outside our borders, we would like to invite you back to our country for longer because three days is surely not enough for you to enjoy our hospitality and beauty of South Africa.

Our continent is moving in the right direction towards one African market. To date, 54 of our countries have signed the Agreement. As of February 2023, 47 of the 54 signatories have deposited instruments of ratification. We are well on our way to creating the world's largest single free trade area, with 1.3 billion people and a Gross Domestic Product of $3.4 trillion.

This represents an important step forward which must culminate in the ratification of the AfCFTA instrument by all African Union (AU) Member States. The implementation of the AfCFTA will improve intra-African trade, the continent’s share and participation in global trade, stimulate and improve her economy as well as contribute to lifting millions of people out of poverty.

Yesterday, the local press reported on recent remarks by the Secretary General of the AfCFTA to the effect that the free trade area holds the potential to inject $450 billion worth of investments into the African economy and help lift between 50 to 100 million people out of poverty by 2035. This would represent a significant improvement to the economy and the quality of life of the people.

For her part, Rebeca Grynspan, the Secretary General of theUnited Nations Conference on Trade and Development, has pointed out that Africa boasts$21.9 billion of untapped export potential. She has suggested that: “An additional $9.2 billion of export potential can be realised through partial tariff liberalization under the AfCFTA over the next five years.”

There exists continental-wide consensus on the need for Africa to reduce structural and regulatory barriers to market entry and to invest in the necessary infrastructure to facilitate intra-African and global trade – more so road and maritime infrastructure.

At present, the quality of much of the continent’s maritime, road and railway infrastructure is less than satisfactory. There are few road links, general poor road infrastructure maintenance and limited regional road linkages throughout the continent’s five regions.

# Yet, roads are the pre-dominant mode of transport on the continent, carrying approximately 80% of goods and 90% of passengers. Without this infrastructure, rail and maritime trade cannot realise their full potential. Road transport is therefore an indispensable part of daily African economic activity and critical to facilitating cross-border trade and regional integration.

# Another impediment we must confront is inefficiencies at border posts, many official and unofficial inspection points along transport corridors and low road densities.

I am informed that during the last three days, you have had extensive discussions which identified more impediments to African trade and the solutions necessary for the implementation of the AfCFTA. The solutions you have identified will hopefully take us a step closer to the actual investment projects that give renewed meaning to the objectives of the AfCFTA.

We similarly hope that you have emerged from this conference with platforms for further interaction to follow up on the realisation of the solutions you have identified. This is because as you would be agreed, it is not enough merely to point out the problems. We have a moral duty to search for answers to the question: “What do we do?”. And so, meetings of this nature ought to serve as launching pads for long lasting relations amongst the African business community in pursuit of practical programmes of (economic) action.

Your interactions have hopefully also reflected on the factors we must all continue to watch and attend for the successful implementation and the AfCFTA. These include such factors as:

1. the skills and technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), without which we cannot be globally competitive;
2. national and regional industrial policies to create and support the growth of vibrant African economies;
3. public policy instruments to support and promote social and political stability and the role of the private sector in this regard;
4. accepting internal and external migration as a fact of life which can and must be managed in the context of regional and continental integration;
5. A deliberate plan to manage rapid urbanisation that is currently unfolding throughout the continent, which calls for the imagination, planning and building of post-colonial new cities that will anchor the continent’s economies of the future, and;
6. building African unity and solidarity as a *sine qua non* for the all-round advancement of the continent; including as it relates to the implementation of the AfCFTA.

The AfCFTA will become a “game changer” to the continent’s growth trajectory as some conference participants have suggested, if you, the continent’s business community together with governments and the working people of our continent act in unison, refusing to drop the ball.

# As you continue to exchange views beyond this conference, I would like to suggest that you also study the address by French President Emmanuel Macron on the future of Europe delivered last week at the Nexus institute in The Hague.

# Among other things, President Macron envisioned:

# A Europe that guarantees security in all its dimensions;

# A Europe that responds to the migration challenge;

# A Europe turned towards Africa and the Mediterranean;

# A model Europe of sustainable development;

# A Europe of innovation and regulation adapted to the digital world, and;

# A Europe of economic and monetary power.

# There is a convergence between the issues we have just identified as the factors to watch and attend in the successful implementation of the AfCFTA and what President Macron raised with respect to Europe. The notable difference is that Europe faces a different challenge of migration than the African continent. The migration they are mostly concerned about is migration from without while we have to contend with migration from within the African continent.

# President Macron’s address provides a strategic inlet on the thinking of an important section of European political opinion and how it will shape the continent’s trajectory and its relations with the rest of the world, Africa included.

Let me conclude by returning to the question of social and political stability to which I referred as one of the success factors for the AfCFTA.

Unarguably, war and peace have a very direct and material impact on the success of continental initiatives like the AfCFTA. This is why our Heads of State and Government adopted the May 2013 Solemn Declaration which committed the continent to silence the guns by 2020. The fact that the guns are still firing should tell us that we should spare no effort in the quest for peace.

It is in this context that we reiterate South Africa’s deep concern about the fighting that broke out in the sister African country of Sudan over the weekend between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces.

We are particularly concerned about rising numbers of civilian loss of life, the destruction of private and public infrastructure, the likely humanitarian disaster that is likely to arise with the entrapment of civilians in their houses with no access to food and other basic necessities. Equally concerning is the impact of the conflict on Sudan’s neighbours.

South Africa fully supports the decision of the African Union Peace and Security Council at its 1149th meeting, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on April 16, 2023, on the situation in Sudan.

We commend the efforts of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to resolve the conflict. In this regard, we wish Presidents Salva Kiir of South Sudan, William Ruto of Kenya and Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti well in their efforts to secure a ceasefire and an immediate commencement of the implementation of the December 5, 2022 framework agreement aimed at returning Sudan to civilian rule to which the belligerents have committed themselves.

So will the guns permanently fall silent!

Thank you.