Speech by H.E. Olusegun Obasanjo, Chairperson of the Tana-High Level Forum on Security in Africa

Excellencies, Honourable Ministers, Ambassadors, distinguished guests, the youth, ladies and gentlemen, let me welcome you to the first gathering of the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa.

Last year, our continent of Africa faced many challenges among them the Arab Spring and the events in Libya. Currently, the situation in Mali, which is being resolved, and now the situation in Guinea Bissau must give us a cause for concern. The situation with Ethiopia’s neighbour, Somalia and we are happy to welcome the president of Somalia, he will of course give us food for thought, all these highlight the necessity for a meeting of this kind. And as the prime minister said, it is not meant to duplicate, it is meant to reinforce, it is meant to compliment and it is meant to help in finding solutions to the issues of peace and security which appear intractable in our continent.

It gives me great pleasure, therefore to welcome you to Bahir Dar for the first Tana-High Level Forum on Security in Africa. This inaugural Forum is significant for a number of reasons:

First is the unique historical and beautiful setting. Bahir Dar is the capital city of the State of Amhara. The region, and indeed the city, form part of the rich Ethiopian history, which is well documented in the booklet we have shared to you. It is both interesting and exciting that this maiden Tana High-Level Forum is held against the backdrop of such history and such beauty.

Second, this is the first time in the history of Africa that a distinguished group of leading multi-stakeholder personalities are meeting in an informal setting to discuss strategic peace and security challenges facing our continent. Rarely in the African development and peace and security process do we have civil society, the private sector, think tanks, scholars, diplomats, government and intergovernmental organisations, as well as former and current Heads of State and Government sitting together to discuss issues of peace and security and to find appropriate steps and measures to strengthen peace and security on the continent.

Third, the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa is designed to be an annual event, whereby stakeholders will rub minds and discuss realistic ideas and relevant actions to prevent, manage and resolve issues of conflict and security in Africa.

Why create the Tana Forum on Security in Africa? Some of you may ask. Perhaps the establishment of the Tana Forum is an indication of the achievements made by the African Union (and the OAU before it) over the years in opening up spaces for citizen participation in peace and
security matters of the continent. The AU’s adoption of Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa in 2002, and the Constitutive Act of the AU, as well as the African Peace and Security Architecture, are all signs of success and the long road we have walked in our efforts in trying to attain peace and security in Africa. We are all aware of the ongoing sterling efforts of the AU and the AU Commission, Regional Economic Communities and Member States to resolve ongoing peace and security challenges on the continent. Yes, so much has been done, but so much is left to be done. In fact, so much is unpredictable in our circumstances. Again, the unpredictability is underlined by the event in Guinea Bissau.

The recent events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have shown that more than ever before, Africans need to speak with a common and strong voice. We also need to enhance our capability to address unpredictable situations of conflict and insecurity. To effectively deal with the threats that Africa faces now and in the future, there is a need to practically translate our common vision to complement the legal instruments and institutional mechanisms. This includes building a common spirit, a common language and common motivations among all citizens in order to confront the present challenges as they emerge. Security and peace are the foundation of any democracy, good governance, economic development, growth, social cohesion and progress.

When, in August 2011, Dr. Rukato and Mr. Mulugeta from the Institute for Peace and Security Studies came to see me in Ogun State with a letter requesting me to take the Chair of the first Forum, it was not difficult to see the potential of their idea. I accepted, and I am grateful to Professor Andreas for embracing this initiative and seeing it through to its realisation which we witness today.

I am particularly indebted to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who offered to host the first Forum in Ethiopia. Ethiopia, by the virtue of its status as a host of the African Union is the right place for the seat of this forum.

The Institute for Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University has heartily accepted to organise this first forum and the subsequent ones until it becomes part of our annual calendar.

We chose the city of Bahir Dar for relaxation, peace, quiet, security and informality, while doing serious brainstorming and rubbing of minds. We have chosen the Baobab tree as a symbol of the Tana High-Level Forum; indeed we are going to talk under the tree here in the hall, in the best of African traditions. The tree symbolizes the importance of dialogue as a key aspect of conflict resolution and instituting peace and security. Meeting under the tree stands for the traditional values of love and brotherhood, hospitality and communalism of Africa. It also stands for the...
ethical principles of justice, reciprocity, equity, integrity and honesty. The Tana Forum challenges us to become ever more steadfast in pursuing these values and virtues.

We will talk today about the fragility of states and the prospects for peace in Africa. We want to talk about weak states, and what makes our states weak, and what ingredients or factors are necessary to make states strong? Even states that we call strong, how strong are they?

Our second topic is the governance or management of diversity and its implications for peace and security. There is no country in Africa that has not got diversity as an issue or as a challenge. I do not see it as a problem; instead, it is an opportunity we should cherish. Most of our countries would be minuscule if we had no diversity in religion, culture, ethnicity, language or social group. The question is, how do we manage diversity? It is mostly a problem when there is no equity, fairness and justice. Diversity itself is not a problem; the problem is normally its poor management or total neglect of its management.

Last year, we witnessed the creation of a 54th African country, the Republic of South Sudan. A third important topic to be discussed at this Forum is the building of a new nation: in South Sudan and its relation to the Sudan. This is in response to urgent needs and issues. At the same time, Sudan and South Sudan will serve as instructive cases for the other topics, fragility and diversity.

What do we expect from this forum? We expect for this forum on security in Africa to be an annual event. We are going to put it on our calendar of key annual events on the continent. So that annually, we know when it is taking place and of course where it is taking place. Dr. Rukato said if you are invited, even if you are not invited, you may attain to come and if you seek entry and you are permitted, you are welcome.

There can never be too much of what we do in our part, to bring about peace, stability and security to our continent.

Finally, I would like to offer my thanks to Prof. Andreas Eshete and to the Institute for Peace and Security Studies of the Addis Ababa University for their diligent efforts over the past year in the planning and organisation of the Tana Forum. They have done an excellent job.

Thank you.