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**STATEMENT BY THE REPRESENTATIVE OF AFRICAN UNION
COMMISSION, ON BEHALF OF ADV. BIENCE GAWANAS, COMMISSIONER
FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS TO THE HIGH LEVEL MINISTERIAL MEETING ON
HEALTH RESEARCH FOR DISEASES CONTROL AND DEVELOPMENT
ACCRA, GHANA, 17TH JUNE 2006**

- *Your Excellency President John Agyekum KUFUOR,
Head of State of the Republic of Ghana,*
- *Honourable Ministers,*
- *Representatives of UN Agencies and other Development Partners,*
- *Representatives of Regional Economic Communities,*
- *Members of the Diplomatic Corps,*
- *Invited Guests,*
- *Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I feel deeply honoured and delighted to participate on behalf of the Commissioner for Social Affairs among the distinguished delegates from Africa, Asia and Latin America, on the occasion of the convening of the high level ministerial meeting on health research for diseases control and development.

First of all, I wish to thank His Excellency President John Agyekum KUFUOR for sparing time from his busy schedule to be with us this morning.

I also wish to thank the Government and the people of Ghana for their hospitality. Our gratitude also goes to the Honourable Ministers of Health of Ghana and Nigeria for joining efforts in preparing this gathering in synergy with their counterparts from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

I would, therefore wish to take this opportunity to convey to you the greetings and best wishes of H.E. Advocate Bience Gawanas, AU Commissioner for social affairs who was unable to be with you due to other important commitments.

This high level meeting is particularly important since it is occurring immediately after the African Union Heads Of State Special Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Which took place in Abuja, Nigeria, 2-4 May 2006 on the theme: "*Universal Access to HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria Services by a United Africa by 2010*". One of the issues that were highlighted at the special summit was promotion of research in Africa, an area that has been badly neglected in the past. The main objective of the special summit was to review the status of implementation of the 2001 Abuja Declaration and Plan of Action on HIV/AIDS, and chart the way forward for a more effective response. The 2001 declaration had also underscored the need for promotion of research of Africa. It is high time that Africa refrained from relying on utilizing imported research. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has indeed proved that research, especially towards an HIV vaccine, should be done in the location where the anticipated outcome would have to be applied.

Moreover, although research is generally under funded the situation is much worse in Africa.

Furthermore research in vaccines or new drugs is a very expensive venture and cannot be afforded by individual countries. In this regard it would be better if regional centres of excellence were established to serve a number of neighbouring countries. The need for such centres was noted by African Heads of State and Government at the January 2005 Ordinary Session of the AU assembly which was held in Abuja, Nigeria, January 2005.

There are numerous issues on which research should be undertaken. However, with the limited infrastructure, supplies as well as human and financial resources there is need for proper planning and prioritization. In this connection, focus should be laid on the commonest causes of morbidity and mortality in Africa such as HIV/AIDS, TB, Malaria, Nutrition-related, Diarrhoeal diseases, Respiratory infections and Maternal pathologies. However, chronic diseases and Road Accidents should not be over looked as they are on the increase and are very expensive to manage. We should also bear in mind that results from research sometimes take long to be realized. This requires a lot of patience.

In all AU Health related meetings, Health Systems Strengthening has been singled out as the key factor to apprehend in order to attempt to deal with reducing the burden of excessive and avoidable Morbidities and Mortalities in Africa.

Health Systems Research (HSR) in Africa is still fragment, highly specialized and is only allocated 0.02% of health expenditure far too low to have an impact on health systems development.

HSR is the production of knowledge and applications to improve how societies organize themselves to achieve health goals, including how they plan, managed and finance activities to improve health, as well as the roles, perspectives and interests of different actors in this process. HSR includes research on health policies although at times this might be distinguished as “health policy and systems research.” Health Systems Strengthening Programs in Africa must provide:

- Support for and collaboration with the Ministries of Health at central and sub-national levels in every major activity,
- Inclusion of private sector providers and consumers of health care
- Consideration of the cost and sustainability of every health program developed in the work plans, and
- Coordination with other international partners in the health development community.

Over the last three years the African Union Commission engaged in driving the research agenda forward in close collaboration with organisations such the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria (MIM) Secretariat in Dar-es-Salaam Tanzania, the WHO Africa AIDS Vaccine Programme, the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI).

We aim at developing a comprehensive and concrete plan for the establishment or strengthening African Health Systems and specifically of Health Research Centres and Centres of Excellence for Infectious Disease Research in Africa.

Such centres would serve the whole of the continent and the activities would thus extend beyond national interests/benefits. The Centres first established would be a starting point, and it is a goal to add additional centres to the network in the future.

As we deliberate on health research we need to address the fundamental issue of ethics and related guidelines. Many achievements have been made in Science and Development through ethical research which is monitored and verified. Researcher should therefore be ready to learn from their peers and be corrected when necessary. They should also be ready to share their work with others working in the same field.

The African Union Commission wishes to emphasize and reiterate that fundamental and operational research in Africa has to incorporate the realities and specificities of African People, African Resources and African Priorities. The current priority is research towards Universal Access to prevention, treatment, care and support; aimed at stabilising and then reversing the trend of the major causes of mortality and morbidity in Africa. As regularly urged by leaders in and outside Africa, let us work together for universal access to health service by 2010. We have overcome other obstacles in the past. What is to stop us from conquering prevailing conditions such as Malaria, AIDS, TB, Maternal and Child Morbidities? The path to this goal is research and rational application of the results.

I thank you very much for your attention.