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STATEMENT ON THE
ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

BY

H.E. DR. RUNALDO RONALD VENETIAAN,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SURINAME

TO THE
SUMMIT OF ACP HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT
ACCRA, GHANA
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Thank you chair for giving me the floor,

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I take the floor to kickoff the discussion on the Economic Partnership Agreements, allow me please to use this opportunity to thank President John Kufuor and the Government and people of Ghana for the warm and generous hospitality extended to me and my delegation.

I also want to compliment Ghana for the excellent arrangements made for this sixth ACP Summit.

With deep sorrow we learned about the passing away of the late Minister of Finance of Ghana. May I convey my sympathy to you Mr. President, to the bereaved family and to the Government and people of Ghana?

I have been asked to briefly present the background and an overview of the current state-of-play of the EPAs, and highlight some important issues that merit attention. I will also provide some details on the EPA situation in the Caribbean region.

At our 3rd ACP Summit held in Nadi, Fiji, in July 2002, we endorsed the general ACP guidelines for negotiating the Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union.

The ACP EPA negotiating guidelines, which had been adopted by our Council of Ministers, built on the objectives and principles enshrined in the Cotonou Agreement. More specifically:

- the EPAs must be instruments that stimulate sustainable development and the economic growth of our countries;
- the EPAs must facilitate the gradual and harmonious integration of our countries into the global economy; and ultimately,
- the EPAs must contribute to reducing and eventually eradicating poverty in our countries.

In order to achieve those objectives, the ACP Group and the EU agreed that, as a principle, the EPAs must take into account the specific economic, social, environmental and structural constraints of the ACP countries and regions. Consequently, the decision was taken to design EPAs that focus on the specific needs and characteristics of each regional grouping.

In other words, the EPAs should build on existing regional-integration arrangements and support the initiatives and objectives that each ACP region has set out for itself. The goal is to achieve the level of integration that would best enable the existing regional arrangements to play a positive role in accelerating the development of our countries.

Colleagues,

We are at a defining moment in our relationship with the European Union as we continue to fashion new and fundamentally different trading regimes. They are not only more regional in character but also reciprocal in nature.

As we embark on this path, we need to ensure that the solidarity of the ACP Group remains a key principle.

The ACP Group's decision to further strengthen our trading relationship with the European Union was driven by various motivations.

- First and foremost, there was the common desire to ensure a more secure legal foundation for our trading relationship. It is no secret that preferences are being eroded, and that the possibility of securing waivers has become increasingly more challenging.
- Secondly, there was the need to expand our trade base, which for more than three decades has been limited to trade in goods, and to incorporate other trade disciplines.

As such, the specific objective of the ACP States, when they set out to negotiate the Economic Partnership Agreements, was to create an economic partnership with the European Union that would encompass trade in goods and services, investment and development cooperation, with a view to attaining the general objective of sustained and sustainable development for our economies.

The EPAs call for commitments by both parties:

- On the ACP side, we need to reform our policies, restructure and improve the competitiveness of our economies as well as open up our markets at a rhythm

and pace commensurate with our development needs and aspirations.

- The EU for its part will have to broaden and improve our market access to the maximum in the shortest possible time.
- The EU will also have to provide timely development support to all the economic sectors that would help improve the competitiveness of our economies.

In addition, considerable financial support will be needed to facilitate the economic adjustment required for us to meet the challenges of the new, open environment as well as to implement commitments undertaken in the EPA.

So then, what is the **current state-of-play** of the Economic Partnership Agreements?

Of the seventy-eight (78) ACP States involved in the EPA negotiation process, thirty-five (35) countries – that is, less than half – had initialed agreements by the end of 2007:

Fifteen (15) Caribbean countries initialed comprehensive EPAs, while eighteen (18) countries from Africa, and two (2) from the Pacific – initialed interim EPAs, with the

understanding that they would continue negotiating comprehensive EPAs.

The remaining 43 ACP States are still involved in the negotiations.

I think it would be safe to say that for nearly all the States that initialed interim agreements, the main objective was to ensure that there would be no trade disruption after the 31 December 2007 deadline, when the preferential trade arrangements under the Cotonou Agreement, and the WTO waiver expired. A replacement trade regime that would govern the trade relations between the ACP States and the European Union had to be in place by that date.

For those regions that are yet to conclude full EPAs, the challenges ahead lie in addressing the issues in the interim agreements that are of concern to them, while at the same time, negotiating the outstanding issues. I was informed that the African Union Summit, meeting in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, in June 2008, endorsed the Report from the AU Ministers of Trade and Finance which recommended a re-negotiation of a number of provisions which they deemed problematic.

With regard to **the Caribbean region**, let me share with you the outcome of the Meeting of Heads of State and Government of the CARIFORUM States, held in Barbados on 10 September 2008.

With the exception of Guyana and Haiti, all the CARIFORUM States indicated their readiness to sign, **in its present form**, the Economic Partnership Agreement initialed last December.

The Government of Guyana, for its part, indicated its readiness to sign on to the "Trade in Goods" section of the Agreement and to continue negotiations with the European Union, on the other disciplines covered in the present initialed text.

Haiti has reserved its position, subject to further consultation.

CARIFORUM countries are scheduled to sign the Agreement with the EU in Barbados on 15 October 2008.

Our countries have come to this position after significant discussions, many of them regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the agreement.

Against this background it is necessary to recall that it was in large part to secure their exports to Europe that our countries agreed to enter into negotiations on Economic Partnership agreements. However, we are already confronted by threats to challenge EC regulations that will come out of the EPAs, through mechanisms of the WTO.

ACP countries must urge the EC to vigorously defend against these baseless challenges and ensure that the legitimate interests of ACP suppliers of goods, as envisaged under the recently concluded and still to be concluded Economic Partnership Agreements, are safeguarded and are in no way jeopardized or undermined.

In moving ahead, let me reiterate the need for us to be guided by the overriding principle of unity and solidarity by all of us in all our actions and activities. We in the Caribbean are committed to this principle and to that end we hope that we could all be signatories to the same agreement.

Further the Caribbean's belief in and support for ACP solidarity are demonstrated in CARIFORUM's response to the invitation from other ACP regions to consult with them on various issues. Those consultations were mainly focused on services and intellectual property.

The ACP Group must continue to resist any attempt to divide it. Although diverse, the members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States share a number of commonalities, in particular in economic, social, political and cultural areas. The need to maintain, solidify and deepen our unity, especially as sister-regions continue to negotiate the outstanding EPA-related issues, is more than urgent today. In that unity lays our greatest strength in the international arena.

Thank you.