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**ADDRESS BY DR LUIS SAMBO, WHO REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR AFRICA, AT THE  
OPENING CEREMONY OF THE SIXTY-THIRD SESSION OF THE REGIONAL  
COMMITTEE FOR AFRICA**

Your Excellency Mr Florent Ntsiba, Minister of State,  
Minister of Labour and Social Security, Representative of His Excellency, the President of the  
Republic of Congo,  
Distinguished Members of Government and Dignitaries of the Republic of Congo,  
Mr Mayor of Brazzaville,  
Your Excellency, Minister of Health of Angola, Chairman of the Sixty-second session of the WHO  
Regional Committee for Africa,  
Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegation,  
Director-General of WHO, Dr Margaret Chan,  
Deputy Director-General of WHO,  
Distinguished Ambassadors, Heads of Diplomatic and Consular Mission,  
Heads of United Nations Agencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasant duty for me to address this august assembly this morning at the opening  
ceremony of the Sixty-third session of the Regional Committee.

I would like to take this opportunity to especially express my profound gratitude to His Excellency  
Mr Denis Sassou-Nguesso, President of the Republic, the Government and people of Congo for their  
great concern for the WHO Regional Office and its staff. The multi-faceted support provided by the  
Government of the Republic of Congo enables us to work in serenity and thus contribute to  
improving health in Africa; I am convinced that the WHO Regional Office will continue to benefit  
from the benevolence of the Congolese authorities.

I would like here and now to express my gratitude to Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, for her advocacy in favour of Africa, her support and her shrewd advice. Dr Chan, I would like to assure you of the African Region's commitment to implementing the WHO reform, under your enlightened leadership.

I hail your presence, Honourable Ministers of Health, and would like to tell you how much I appreciate the excellent cooperation ties that you maintain with the Regional Office and WHO country offices. Allow me to extend a special word of welcome to the Republic of South Sudan which joined the WHO African Region and which is participating as member of this Committee for the first time. I wish the delegation of South Sudan a warm welcome to the WHO African Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to thank you in your various capacities for honouring our invitation and for your constant support for our common cause which consists in enabling the African populations to attain the best health status possible.

Honourable Minister of State,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since independence, our Region has scored significant successes in the fight against major endemic diseases which were in the past the main causes of morbidity, disability and mortality. **Smallpox** is now eradicated. **Sleeping sickness** has been reduced to some isolated pockets. **Onchocerciasis** is currently under control. **Leprosy** has been eliminated. The number of reported cases of **poliomyelitis** has dropped sharply. We are on the verge of eradicating **guinea-worm disease**. This progress is the fruit of health service reorientation in Africa which prioritized basic health care.

I would also like to point out that over the past two years progress has been made in the Region: the **strengthening of health systems** is a prerequisite for quality health care delivery and the achievement of universal health coverage. To address the *human resources crisis*, WHO worked with experts from countries of the Region to prepare the Regional Roadmap which should guide the countries in increasing the health workforce.

In a bid to step up investments and optimize the use of *financial resources in the health sector*, in 2012 WHO, together with Harmonization for Health in Africa (HHA) agencies, organized the Conference of African Ministers of Health and Finance hosted by the African Development Bank (ADB). The conference issued the Tunis Declaration which advocates the intensification of dialogue and collaboration between the health and finance sectors. To promote national health information

system strengthening, the Regional Office established the *African Health Observatory* and developed a framework to guide the establishment of National Health Observatories.

Concerning **mother, newborn, child and reproductive health-based programmes**, I am pleased to mention that, under the leadership of Her Excellency Helen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, the Commission on Women's Health in the African Region presented its report entitled *Addressing the Challenge of Women's Health in Africa*. The report calls on Governments to intensify their actions aimed at accelerating the reduction of maternal and neonatal mortality. The Sixty-sixth World Assembly adopted, in turn, a resolution on "Recommendation of the United Nations Commission on Commodities of Vital Importance for Women and Children". To date, 11 countries of the Region have received support from WHO to prepare projects relating thereto. Regarding MDG4, 13 countries are on the right track to achieving it and 24 are making progress. As concerns MDG5, two countries are on the right track to attaining it and 17 have reduced their mortality ratio by more than 50%.

**As regards communicable disease control**, the countries of the Region are continuing to intensify their efforts to reduce the burden of morbidity and mortality associated with HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. In this area, a milestone was the preparation of the new "WHO Guidelines on the Use of Antiretroviral Drugs for Treating and Preventing HIV Infection". The implementation of these new guidelines, which recommend a greater number of people eligible for treatment, will have very significant impacts on national health services. Another milestone was the publication in 2012 by WHO of the document entitled "*Accelerating Work to Overcome the Global Impact of Neglected Tropical Diseases: A Roadmap for Implementation*" which was used to prepare the proposed Regional Strategic Plan submitted to this session of the Regional Committee. In addition, following the adoption by the World Health Assembly of the Global Vaccine Action Plan, we have included in the agenda of this Committee a topic on "Immunization in the African Region". This should help us to obtain the orientations of Member States for the preparation of the Regional Immunization Strategy 2014–2020.

Concerning **noncommunicable diseases**, I am pleased to underscore, firstly, that the Brazzaville Declaration was endorsed by all ministers of health during the Sixty-second session of the Regional Committee in Luanda. Secondly, that an important intersectoral and multidisciplinary consultation on risk factors was organized in 2012 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Participants expressed concern about the increase in risks associated with noncommunicable diseases, notably the harmful use of alcohol, tobacco use, lack of physical activity and unbalanced diet. The consultation recommended that each country should hold a multisectoral dialogue to help identify policy elements and develop regulatory frameworks for enhancing public health promotion.

Regarding **epidemic and public health emergency preparedness and response**, the countries of the Region were supported to intensify integrated disease surveillance and public health risk management. I take pleasure in announcing that the African Public Health Emergency Fund is now operational; to date, five countries of the Region have already contributed US\$ 1.7 million.

Honourable Minister of State,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At this moment when the Regional Committee is being held, public health in Africa is facing challenges and opportunities. **Challenges** include notably: slow progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals; the double burden of communicable and noncommunicable diseases; recurrent epidemics and other public health emergencies; poor health infrastructure; I would like here to emphasize the circulation and consumption of counterfeit drugs; resistance to antibiotics; human resources for health crisis; and under-financing of the health sector.

There are **many opportunities**. Allow me to underline a few of them: *the new agreement between the African Union and WHO signed in 2012* will give top priority to disease control, mother and child health, and access to quality drugs; the nearly 5% average *economic growth rate in Africa* should foster investments in the health sector; *the ongoing WHO reform focused* on three thrusts, namely programmes and priorities, governance and management. The reform, which is a strategic response to a rapidly changing global environment, will enable WHO to be more efficient in order to better respond to country demands. The adopted programmes and priorities set out in the Twelfth WHO General Programme of Work are in line with the health priorities of the African Region. I therefore encourage the ministers of health to get actively involved in its implementation; *and the commitment of most countries of the Region* to the sectoral reform process in order to achieve universal health coverage.

In light of the current challenges and opportunities, I would like to propose a few **lines of action for the future**, notably: scaling up of efforts to achieve the health-rated MDGs; intensification of actions aimed at reducing the scale of noncommunicable and neglected tropical diseases; active participation of countries in discussions on the setting of the post-2015 health agenda priorities; updating of strategies for cooperation between WHO and countries (CCS) based on national health policies and priorities set out in the Twelfth WHO General Programme of Work; greater involvement of countries in the implementation of the International Health Regulations; and implementation of strategies and interventions for eventual universal health coverage.

Honourable Minister of State,  
Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen;

The agenda of the Sixty-third session of the Regional Committee will address important issues including, I would like to underscore: challenges of women's health; the role of traditional medicine; regulation of medical products; utilizing ehealth solutions; immunization status; HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment; and managerial issues.

I would like to address Mr François Ibovi, Minister of Health and Population of the Republic of Congo, and his task force to extend to them, on behalf of WHO, my profound gratitude for the excellent support given us for the organization of this session of the Regional Committee.

Honourable Ministers,

I have visited most countries of the Region. I know how much you believe in what you are doing for the health of the people. I encourage you to further mobilize the other sectors to promote health determinants for the implementation of national health policies, in line with the new public health vision. I will continue to emphasize the fact that good living conditions for the population and the adoption of health-promoting behaviours are essential for achieving the much desired highest level of health possible. As leaders of the health sector, I urge you, Honourable Ministers, to pursue efforts to decentralize and strengthen the capacity of health services in collaboration with local administrative and political authorities. This should help to fill the gaps still existing between health services and communities. It is at this cost that we can scale up efficient and already proven health interventions.

I am convinced beforehand that the decisions and resolutions which will stem from our proceedings will meet our expectations.

I wish our proceedings all the success.

Thank you for your kind attention!