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**SPEECH DELIVERED BY HIS EXCELLENCY, OBIANG NGUEMA MBASOGO, HEAD
OF STATE AND FOUNDING PRESIDENT OF THE PDGE, AT THE OFFICIAL
OPENING OF THE SIXTIETH SESSION OF THE WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE
FOR AFRICA**

WHO Director-General,
WHO Regional Director for Africa,
Your Excellency Mr Alpha Oumar Konare,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for the People of Equatorial Guinea and its Government to host the Sixtieth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa, a meeting that will address the health situation in Africa, and more particularly, the topic of maternal mortality as a major part of the Millennium Development Goals to which we have committed ourselves.

We would like, first and foremost, to welcome most warmly to Equatorial Guinea the delegates, participants and guests who have travelled to Malabo here to attend this major event. We wish them a happy stay in our country and hope they would enjoy the hospitality of the People of this country.

I am pleased to recognize the presence, in our midst, of Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, and Dr Luis Gomes Sambo, WHO Regional Director for Africa, for having responded to our invitation and for the great interest they show in the health problems of the world in general and of Africa in particular. Your presence provides a stimulus and gives cause to hope that WHO will strengthen its action for the benefit of Africa.

The presence, at this gathering, of President Alpha Oumar Konare, a renowned personality in the African continent, with vast experience in African issues, will also help this conference to adopt appropriate decisions regarding health issues in Africa.

Director-General of WHO,
Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and gentlemen,

This meeting of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa is taking place in a very specific context that calls for our will to address the health situation in Africa in line with the Millennium Development Goals. Actually, following the recommendations of the recent meeting of the

African Union, our States should make an accurate evaluation and objective programming for Africa's presentation during the United Nations General Assembly which will devote special days to the topic of maternal and infant mortality.

May I mention, therefore, that health, and in particular, the thorny issue of maternal mortality, remain at the centre of all discussions taking place at both the regional and global levels.

We would like to use this opportunity to make sure that, in addition to the much-needed situation analysis, we would draw and receive lessons regarding the implementation of activities with a view to taking the necessary measures to bridge the gap still persisting in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

It is gratifying to note that, apart from maternal mortality in Africa which is the main theme of this meeting, you will be addressing another equally important topic concerning health systems strengthening and financing, research, and means of prevention.

Maternal mortality should continue to be the focus of our concerns as long as we have not found adequate solutions. We know that much has been done, since the development of the Road Map, to reverse this disastrous situation; yet, much more remains to be done.

Consequently, the majority of African countries are facing the challenge of improving maternal health as women continue to be the backbone of the family in Africa.

It is therefore logical that our discussions address all the stages we need to go through in order free ourselves from this situation. I trust you would agree with me on the reality that this situation is an emergency.

The main difficulties we need to overcome in order to achieve the health Millennium Development Goals include inadequacy of household statistics, inadequate coverage of birth and deaths registrations, the weakness of health information systems and data management capacities, and lack of research centres.

Foremost among the main lessons learnt so far in the health sector, ten years after the launch of the Millennium Development Goals, is that improving the development of adequately-financed health systems remains the key to success.

At the moment, there is increasing approval of the drive towards health systems strengthening based on the values and principles of primary health care.

In this perspective, the Ouagadougou Declaration on Primary Health Care and Health Systems provides a precious opportunity and is the most recent and comprehensive commitment of our States to improve the health of the African people.

I would like to state, once again, that we African leaders are entirely committed to participating fully in achieving the Millennium Development Goals in the quest for health for all throughout the continent.

WHO Director-General,
WHO Regional Director,
Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will agree with me that research and medical care are fundamental to improving public health. A major effort is required in research if we want to increase significantly our capacity to prevent and control the major diseases affecting humankind.

As you would know, research plays a crucial role in health improvement by taking into account and evaluating interventions and by guiding decision-making.

In our Region, there is an increasingly evident gap in the application of existing technologies to improve public health.

We think it is time to mobilize political and economic support for research and development initiatives in Africa.

In this regard, may I inform you that the International Prize for Research in Life Sciences established by UNESCO, with the funding of the Obiang Nguema Mbasogo Foundation, seeks to stimulate research and serve as a true instrument of stimulation, promotion and development of scientific research. Researchers and scientists consider the prize as an opportunity for supporting and acknowledging their efforts.

In the same spirit, Equatorial Guinea has made an offer to the African Union to host and finance the headquarters of the African Observatory for Science, Technology and Innovation, that will serve as the basis for research and information sharing and as data bank for African countries.

WHO Director-General,
Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Equatorial Guinea, despite the growth and infrastructure development, the health situation of the people continue to be characterized by a heavy disease burden due to the persistence of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria which are still public health problems. Under these conditions, the situation of women and children, as the most vulnerable groups, continue to be a major concern.

Access to drinking water and environmental sanitation services is still limited and is actually the most important risk factor.

It is however, important to note the major efforts already made or in progress to reverse the situation in the context of our comprehensive programme of development whose initial impact has been encouraging.

In regard to pandemics, we have real cause to be optimistic about the control of onchocerciasis whose vector of transmission has been eliminated on the entire island of Bioko, as evidenced by the outcomes of surveys carried out recently by WHO experts. We expect to replicate this experience in the mainland of our country.

In the malaria control effort, the intensification of effective interventions such as large-scale use of insecticide-treated nets, early treatment, spraying of homes as well as organized and

systematic cleaning of rivers, pools, ponds and refuse dumps have had a tangible impact on the disease.

Our National Economic and Social Development Plan aimed at eradicating poverty and transforming Equatorial Guinea into an Emerging Country by 2020 is being implemented under 15 major programmes including the programme for health for all by 2020.

Phase I of the plan now being implemented covers the period 2008–2012 and is the phase for transformation including the development of basic economic and social infrastructure, training of human resources and institutional reforms.

Phase II, covering the period 2012–2020, will complete infrastructure building and accelerate economic diversification of the pillars of priority sectors.

Our objective, after poverty eradication, is to achieve real social well-being for the entire population of Equatorial Guinea.

Mr Regional Director,

The people of Africa are facing many challenges including the alarming health situation such as natural or manmade epidemics and disasters, overstressing the capacities of governments.

If concerted action is not taken, these adversities will continue to have a negative impact on the health of the population with unacceptable mortality rates and even greater impact on the most vulnerable populations, in other words, children and women.

How can our health systems provide adequate means of effective response?

This situation calls for our attention as Africans, as a matter of priority. It means that we should respond positively to the resolution adopted by the Fifty-ninth session of the Regional Committee on the establishment of the African public health emergency fund whose contribution modalities we are studying.

We would like to use this opportunity to, once again, commend the perfect collaboration we have had with WHO since the signing of the framework agreement in December 1980.

We have provided the land on which the WHO country office has been built.

Furthermore, the Government of Equatorial Guinea has made a voluntary contribution of US\$ 1.5 million to WHO for a four-year period to enable it to provide technical support to the development of health programmes in my country.

This contribution is the fruit of a mutually satisfactory and productive cooperation. We intend to continue to count on this collaboration to enable us to make the progress needed to achieve our objective of health for all by 2020.

Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The whole of Africa is, understandably, expecting positive outcomes from this year's session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa.

For our part, we wish that this session go down in the annals of health promotion in Africa.

I now have the pleasure to declare open the Sixtieth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa.

I thank you.