SECRETARY GENERAL’S NEW YEAR MESSAGE

At the end of 2014, I crossed the Rwanda Ugandan border using my National Identity card. Every time I do so, I am thankful for all the hard work that you all put in, in the kitchen of integration, to make sure that the people of East Africa get the benefits they deserve.

2014 is gone, and 2015 is upon us! We have come a long way, between yesterday and today - and we have a very long way to go! 2014 has left East Africa with an increasingly functional Single Customs Territory. I thank all involved, from Revenue Authority Officials, clearing and forwarding agents, and everybody in between, who have made this critical milestone in our integration agenda possible.

For the first time in her history, East Africa has negotiated her terms of Trade with the European Union, through an Economic Partnership Agreement. I am proud of our negotiators, who have safeguarded East Africa’s interests, and made sure the agreement contributes to and safe guards our integration, as well as our Industrialization policy and strategy. The Community had also concluded a Trade Facilitation Agreement with the United States of America. Together with a robust Commercial dialogue, and an investment treaty which we shall negotiate in the coming year, our relationship with the US and other major trading blocks is robust, vibrant, and beneficial to the people of East Africa.

Negotiations on a Free Trade Area between COMESA, EAC , and SADC made significant progress. It is my conviction that we are at the cusp of a historic agreement that will enable Africa to reclaim her rightful place in the Global Arena, and lay a solid foundation for a Continental Free Trade Area. I am immensely proud to have seen East Africa negotiate as a bloc. It has been a lesson in the benefits of pooled sovereignty. Nobody loses theirs, but the collective effort is greater than the sum of the constituent parts. East Africans should be justifiably proud of their integration agenda.

Our infrastructure programs and projects are on track, and in the case of the Northern Corridor, on the fast track. For the first time in a hundred years, East Africa is laying new rail tracks. Mombasa and Dar es Salaam Ports have brought on board new berths, integrated and digitized their operations, re-engineered their business processes, and re engaged their stakeholders. I salute all these efforts. They are contributing to the reduction of the cost of doing business in East Africa.

For the first time, we organized the first ever Conference on packaging. As many of you know,
post Harvest losses are a significant to our agriculture and Agro based industries. Yet our industrialization policy and strategy are dependent on agricultural transformation. Packaging is an important component of this strategy. During the coming year, I look forward to the first ever Manufacturing Conference, organize in conjunction with the East African Business Council.

2014 saw our Community, like the rest of the Global Community confront the threat of Ebola. East Africa refaced to this global challenge with determination. Partner States have put in place strategies to deal with the threat. Health screening at our borders has been strengthened. Simulation exercises have been carried out. And the Community has contributed to the global effort against Ebola. Going forward, it is clear that Health Systems Strengthening is critical, not only to enhance the robustness of our response to emergencies such as Ebola, but also for the routine delivery of positive health outcomes. The Community shall continue to work with her Partners to invest in the requisite health systems strengthening.

I am gratified to note the increased involvement of the people of East Africa in the integration process. 2014 saw the involvement of the Religious fraternity and faith leaders in the search for solutions to a East Africa's security challenges. In Kigali, Rwanda, intense discussions were held, and the results thereof give me confidence that the Community is resilient even the face of the threat of those who would sacrifice humanity at the altar of conformity, instead of celebrating its diversity, with its all too human imperfections.

Civil Society, the Private Sector, Women in business, Youth groups, Local Government leaders, and professional associations, have all expressed their commitment to our integration agenda. I thank all of you for your determination and support. Through your activism, we have been able to reduce Non Tariff Barriers to Trade significantly. Our Rules of Origin have been revised. A draft Bill on reduction of NTBs has been negotiated and will be introduced into the East African Legislative Assembly for consideration. Agreement has been reached, after many years, on the extension of the jurisdiction of the East African Court of Justice to cover Trade matters, especially those under the Common Market Protocol. The Court is critical to our integration agenda and I congratulate its leadership for their dedication and professionalism.

I am glad East Africans living with disabilities have become real Partners in our agenda. The Conference with people living with disabilities, held in 2014 cemented this Partnership. I wish to thank Hon. James Ndahiro and Hon Abu Bakr Zain for their leadership. Our Community is only as strong as its weakest links, and I am committed to strengthening these links.

2014 also left us with a historic decision by the Summit to begin the process for a Constitution making for an East African Political Federation. This is a result of many years of hard work by dedicated professionals. I am excited at the possibility we have to reverse the Balkanization of Africa. It is a historic, revolutionary calling, and I thank the leaders of East Africa for their vision and determination to move beyond what is, to what can be!

I thank you, the foot soldiers of integration, for your dedication. HE Uhuru Kenyatta, Chair Person of the Summit has paid tribute to you. The East African Court of Justice, in a historic ruling, has done the same. I can only follow in their footsteps. 2014 has been an exciting and challenging year for you. We have lost a number of colleagues.
My condolences go to you, their families, and friends. Our consolation can only be in the certainty that they died in the service of a cause greater than themselves.

Our Colleagues at the East African Legislative Assembly have had a particularly challenging year. The Assembly has had protracted leadership challenges, which has sapped staff morale. I thank you for your professionalism, dedication and service during this difficult period. Thank you for not allowing partisan interests to cloud your judgement as servants of the people of East Africa.

So, 2014 has been exciting and rewarding. 2015 is pregnant with promise. I am proud to serve with you as we steer the Ship of integration. As we look back with satisfaction, I can only tell you that success only breeds higher expectations, requiring all of us to work harder and smarter, the challenges notwithstanding.

Aluta Continua

Dr Richard Sezibera
Ambassador
Secretary General