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REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR AFRICA

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Seventy-first session

Virtual session, 24–26 August 2021

**OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE SEVENTY-FIRST SESSION OF THE REGIONAL
COMMITTEE BY THE HEAD OF STATE OF TOGO**

Chairperson of the Regional Committee,
Director-General,
WHO Regional Director for Africa,
Your Excellencies Ambassadors,
Representatives of international organizations,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Guests,

Togo is pleased to host the Seventy-first session of the World Health Organization Regional Committee for Africa in a virtual format, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. On behalf of the Head of State, His Excellency Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé and the people of Togo, I wish you a warm welcome.

Our country is honoured to have been chosen, at the end of the Sixty-ninth session of the Regional Committee in 2019 in Brazzaville, to host the next session in 2020. The current global health crisis does not allow for the holding of the session in the usual format.

We pay tribute to the memory of all those who have lost their lives in this pandemic and wish all the sick a speedy recovery.

Director-General,
WHO Regional Director for Africa,

For almost two years now, the world has been experiencing one of the most serious health crises in its history, which spares no continent and affects all sections of society. To date, the pandemic has affected more than two hundred million people and caused more than four million deaths worldwide. In Africa, it has claimed 200 000 victims and affected seven million people. Our continent is directly affected by the current wave, with more than 6000 deaths reported every week.

The response to this pandemic is particularly complex: its evolution is rampant and unpredictable, while its causative agent undergoes mutations that generate variants. Non-compliance with personal protective measures, the inequitable distribution of vaccines and other health products, the weaknesses of our health systems and the major socioeconomic impact of the disease constitute major, additional obstacles.

In its response to the pandemic, Togo has adopted a holistic response, drawing on the skills and contributions of all. Accordingly, we have set up dedicated bodies, rehabilitated and built patient management centres and implemented support measures, such as cash transfers.

The most recent pillar of our response to the pandemic is vaccination, whose campaign we launched in March 2021. To date, 350 000 Togolese citizens have received at least one vaccine dose, and 170 000 are fully vaccinated.

The COVID-19 response is embedded in the Government's road map, proceeding from our national development plan, which seeks to build the foundation for broader social protection through the establishment of a robust, inclusive and resilient health system.

Director-General,
Distinguished Guests,

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the urgent need for global solidarity, highlighting the obligation for each country to seek the best individual and collective protections. International initiatives such as COVAX should be commended and strengthened, in order to avoid a vaccine divide that would put everyone at risk.

I welcome the initiatives undertaken across our continent, through the African Union and Africa CDC, which have led to the establishment of the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust (AVAT) and a platform.

The approach, which indicates a clear resolve to empower our countries, aims to provide our populations with vaccines and health products that meet quality standards, are affordable and available to protect us from stock-outs.

I salute all the African Heads of State who contributed to the realization of this initiative. Togo takes pride in being the first country to receive the Johnson and Johnson vaccine produced in South Africa on 5 August 2021.

All these regional initiatives are inseparable from the fight against substandard and falsified medicines, a scourge on our continent and the subject of the Lomé initiative launched at the end of the Lomé Summit in January 2020.

I should recall that this initiative afforded an opportunity for several Heads of State to commit to action, in particular by reviewing the relevant national legislation; supporting regional initiatives in this area and conducting advocacy towards other African countries. This initiative provided confirmation, if needed, of the commitment of the Head of State, His Excellency Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé, to more inclusive health in a secure environment.

It is therefore natural that Togo is preparing to ratify the treaty establishing the African Medicines Agency, even as I welcome the appointment of its special envoy, Mr Michel Sidibé.

Furthermore, Togo is aware of the crucial importance of skilled human resources that are deployed every day to preserve our health. Very early on, our country prioritized the training of health workers.

The international health community supported Togo's efforts through the creation of the first public health training centre in 1962. To date, our country hosts the only French-speaking public health training centre for middle-level managers. This public health training and research centre

trains health managers with the objective of strengthening our health system in Togo and in the West African subregion.

The World Health Organization has acted as a facilitator and catalyst in initiating and promoting all these initiatives, through its technical support that is both multifaceted and constant. I would like to extend my sincere thanks and congratulations to the Director-General for his dedication and responsiveness since the declaration of this pandemic.

In addition to COVID-19 and polio, the work of this session will focus on all the important public health issues that constitute a source of concern for our continent: health financing, universal health coverage, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis, strategies to tackle meningitis and cervical cancer, digital health, and healthy ageing.

I have no doubt that you have the expertise and determination to carry out the work of this Seventy-first session of the Regional Committee, to which I wish every success and declare open.

Thank you for your kind attention.