

**REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
PAUL KAGAME,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF RWANDA,**

**AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF
COMESA HIGH LEVEL ICT MINISTERS' CONFERENCE**

**Hotel Intercontinental,
Kigali, 1st September, 2004**

The speaker of the Senate;
The Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies;
The Right Honourable Prime Minister;
The President of the Supreme Court;
Secretary General of COMESA;
Honourable Ministers;
Co-operating Partners;
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome our distinguished guests to Rwanda.

The choice of this country as the venue for the COMESA ICT Ministers' Conference is an expression of the confidence you have in us and a reaffirmation of the fraternal relations that exist in the COMESA community, and we are thankful for that.

It is my sincere hope that we will meet your expectations of a good host and that, out of your heavy schedule; you will find time to sample some of the tourist attractions and the traditional hospitality of the Rwanda people.

Distinguished ladies and Gentlemen;

I am indeed honoured to be with you on the occasion of the opening of the "High Level Forum on Implementation of the ICT Policy and Regulatory Reform", organized by COMESA, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Government of Rwanda.

I hope that you will have fruitful deliberations and that the outcome of this meeting will provide an appropriate roadmap for the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in our region.

We know only too well that just as the growth of the 19th and 20th centuries was driven by networks of railways and highways, the growth of the 21st century is being driven by networks of digital highways and ICT value added services. Unlike previously, when we missed both the agricultural and industrial revolutions, we in Africa and in the developing world generally, must regard the digital highway as one of the vectors of growth, and maximally strive to harness its potential.

There is no doubt that telecommunications is the foundation of modern society and that it is the bedrock upon which all ICT activities rest. Our challenge as a region is therefore to establish ICT infrastructure and services that can meet the demands and requirements of our people, both in the short and long term. We in Africa need to constantly define and review our ICT policies and regulatory

frameworks in order to realign them, with the emerging competitive and technological developments. Our Governments should actively take steps to motivate a competition-based supply of different types of inter-connections among the individual consumers in the ICT society.

This is particularly important because while development assumes its own inherent momentum, more often than not, political initiative is a necessary catalyst for enhanced development. In fact, as I have said it elsewhere, we, as “information have-nots”, need to leapfrog many stages in our development process if we are to catch up with the “information haves”.

Excellencies;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

I am particularly happy that this Forum is being organized here in Rwanda because our country seeks to be among the countries that are at the forefront of Africa's effort to use her human and natural resources to help fuel the engine of African Renaissance. We know that the way to lift our people from abject poverty that continues to afflict them is, first and foremost, to empower them by giving them all the tools available.

One of the tools is to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the correct application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) so that they can use them to enhance their other efforts. It is in this regard that we in Rwanda continue to strive to establish the necessary conditions and environment that we hope will enable our people to maximize their talents in the development of our country.

Rwanda is committed to establishing new management methods and strategies that we believe will spur the pace of good governance and sustainable development.

We are determined to fight the scourge of corruption that has besieged many of the developing countries, including those of Africa.

A stable, transparent and predictable framework for business remains an important component of our Government policy. Furthermore, we emphasize the need for an enterprise-friendly environment so as to encourage innovation and attract new investment.

Our Government is fully committed to providing the necessary incentives for investment because we take investment to be an important form of economic activity for the investing side as well as the receiving side.

That is why we have adopted an integrated ICT-led socio-economic development policy and established structures such as the Rwanda Information Technology

Authority (RITA) and the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA) which are necessary for the attainment of the said goals.

With regard to physical infrastructure, we are laying an extensive fibre-optic backbone in several parts of the country in order to improve communications and access to a complete package of products available from the new information highway.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

To achieve valuable results, regional cooperation must be strengthened.

That is why I would like, at this juncture, to commend COMESA on the development of a common information and communications technology policy and model bill. I would also like to register my appreciation for the establishment of the Association of Regulators of Information and Communications in Eastern and Southern Africa (ARICEA), which has been formed to provide a harmonized regional ICT-enabling environment, and to demonstrate best practices for regulators.

Our regional economic communities are the building blocks for the African Union and, using our proximities, we should harmonise our policies to facilitate the development of ICT infrastructure and services across the whole continent.

The COMESA region needs to be free of regulatory barriers so that we can have affordable access, instead of, for instance, having a situation where you have to go through a European country when making a telephone call to your neighbour. Waves, as we all know, have no barriers.

Through the NEPAD framework, we should promote effective interconnections of our region by facilitating investment in the priority areas in the ICT sector, and taking advantage of the economies of scale which would accrue due to our large populations and landmass.

If the exchange of ideas and the movement of people, goods and funds are enhanced within COMESA region, with its great potential, economic activities will be further stimulated and the economies of scale will also take effect.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

Let me conclude my remarks by thanking our co-operating partners, in particular the USAID and the European Union (EU), for providing funding for the COMESA regional ICT programmes and for facilitating this ICT High Level Forum.

I am confident that this forum will provide a platform for the participants to exchange their views and opinions on matters of common interest.

You may also need to explore the opportunities for regional cooperation in the ICT sector and chart out a new vision and action plan for the successful implementation of the common ICT policy and regulatory reforms which COMESA, as a region, has adopted.

Let us work hard in order to transform the digital divide, which we are facing, into a digital breakthrough. It is now my pleasure to declare the “COMESA High Level ICT Ministers’ Conference” officially open.

I wish you all very fruitful deliberations

I thank you.