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HAKAINDE HICHILEMA — 7TH PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF ZAMBIA

2022 EU Formal Sitting: Address by Hakainde Hichilema, President of the Republic of Zambia

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Thank you very much. Your Excellency, Mr Roberta Metsola, President of the European Union Parliament, Honourable Members of the European Parliament, distinguished ladies and gentlemen. Greetings to you all from Zambia.

Allow me, first and foremost, to express our sincere condolences on behalf of the people of Zambia and indeed on my own behalf, on the passing on of His Excellency Mr David Sassoli, former President of the European Parliament. May his soul rest in peace.

Honourable Members, this is the first time in Zambia's history that a sitting President addresses the European Union Parliament. It is a source of great pride for our country that we have been recognised as an exemplary democracy on the African continent and as a key cooperating partner of the European Union.

We thank you for this recognition and we look forward to deepening our engagement and collaboration in the coming years, which should result in tangible benefits for both the people of the Republic of Zambia and indeed the European Union.

Honourable Members, it is a particular privilege for me to personally address this Parliament given the circumstances of 2017, talking about the incarceration.

Following our unlawful incarceration in 2017, the EU Parliament boldly and consistently demanded not only my release, but also the restoration of the rule of law in our country and, of course, human rights. An official resolution was passed by yourselves. This is absolutely humbling to us.

The resolution of 2017 on Zambia, particularly the case of one Hakainde Hichilema, who happens to be myself, was a mark of true solidarity and real commitment to protecting human rights. I remain indebted to you for standing up for human rights and freedom, not only for myself and my co-accused, but for all the people of the Republic of Zambia under the extremely difficult circumstances that we faced at the time. I thank you most sincerely for this gesture.

Truly, the people of Zambia thank you for taking a principled position on the promotion of human rights in our country and indeed on our continent.

The Zambia 2021 elections deserve comment. Zambia's general elections held last year in August demonstrated remarkable strength and resolve by the people of Zambia in their determination to preserve democracy by voting out the party that was then in government and voting us into government. It was a very extraordinary display of willpower and people power in the face of economic hardships and political intimidation.

It was difficult for ordinary people to make such a democratic decision as they did in our favour. We owe the people of Zambia huge gratitude for that.

They decided that they wanted change for better livelihoods given the circumstances they faced. This was not merely an election, but a call to action, a call for change.

The youth, who made 56% of all registered voters, were at the heart of this call for change. I must acknowledge that and we thank them for it. They showed leadership, courage and determination at a time when Zambia needed those qualities the most because democracy was under threat.

On a continent where far too often elections turn violent, our country was able to go through a smooth non-violent transition. Once again, our country demonstrated the democratic principles it embraced since moving from a one-party state in 1991. Peaceful change in 2011 and peaceful change in 2021.

Credit goes to the people of Zambia for being resilient and for their love of democracy. This is what Zambia is known for. This is who we are and we intend to continue on this path.

Honourable Members, as we reflect on this achievement, I wish once again to express our sincere gratitude to the European Union, who together with others deployed a physical observer mission in our country to observe the elections, led by Honourable Member Madam Marie Arena. Thank you to you, Madam, and your team.

The observer mission was a continuation of the longstanding relationship we have had with the European Union and a clear demonstration of commitment by yourselves to supporting Zambia's democratic process. We place on record our deep sense of gratitude to the EU for once again demonstrating your commitment to working alongside us in our quest for development under difficult circumstances.

Let me address the issues of human rights, governance and anti-corruption in our country.

In Zambia, we inherited a very difficult situation. At the time of the elections, Zambia was on the brink of economic collapse where corruption, excess and greed of public officials reigned supreme. No one stood in their way. They got what they wanted, yet they were supposed to be servants of the people.

Short-sighted policies were put in place designed to extract maximum benefit for the few at the expense of the many, where the order of the day was converting public resources into private hands. An unacceptable situation.

Freedom of expression, freedom of association and civic participation were cut out. Democratic institutions designed to ensure checks and balances were compromised and reduced to instruments of dominance for those who held power.

It is against that backdrop that I stand here to firmly attest that the rule of law and respect for human rights are now a matter of priority in terms of restoration.

One of our major pronouncements after taking office was to indicate to all our citizens that community violence and political thuggery were unacceptable. Anyone who engaged in that, whether from the ruling party at the time or from our own party, would be on their own. That signified the end of community violence.

Today, Zambians can move freely at bus stops and markets. Widows and single mothers can trade peacefully to take care of their children without the violence we experienced only months ago. Leadership, in our view, is key in these areas.

Zambia's reputation for peace and democracy is a source of great pride to us, which our administration will continue to protect and safeguard. The peace, stability and unity of our beloved nation are not up for negotiation at any cost.

We want to make sure that as we progress in managing public affairs, we strengthen institutions so that in future no one comes again with such heavy-handedness. We need partners to do that. You are some of those partners.

A free media is indispensable to democratic governance and our administration will protect this fundamental principle in our national discourse. In the last government, many media houses were shut down. We committed when we came into office that not a single media house would be shut down for political reasons. Government has no business shutting down media houses because they criticise it.

We committed to this because checks and balances are important. Every single Zambian is welcome to participate in the governance of our country. It is a right of every citizen and our government will lead by listening to the will of the people at all times.

Honourable Members, let me address legislative reform in our country.

The state of our country in terms of democratic governance, economic performance and upholding human rights demanded that we take bold action to arrest the decline we inherited.

This is why we placed reform at the very top of our agenda. Among the critical issues we have prioritised is legislative reform to curtail the excesses of the past. It is important that we do not just legislate, but also strengthen oversight institutions because legislation alone cannot deliver results without compliance. Compliance is better delivered by institutions that will outlast whichever political party is in office.

As part of these reforms and in response to the extensive recommendations by the EU observer mission and others, our government has already started undertaking significant electoral reforms that will tackle inherent weaknesses in the system and increase the independence of our Electoral Commission.

This is important to ensure participation by citizens is guaranteed and transparency is upheld at all levels of elective office, from grassroots to the presidency.

As an administration, we regard our election not as a triumph, but as a challenge.

Our challenge over the next five years is to lay the foundations for a prosperous future for Zambia's future generations. We must tap into and enhance the innovation and wonder of our youth who hold enormous potential in developing inventive responses to the challenges we face as a country.

Our children and youth are our future, just as they are here in Europe. It is in them that we shall invest in the coming years, particularly through skills development.

We want to rebuild the economy and repair the social fabric of our country to create opportunities for skills, jobs and self-employment for our youth.

This is why our administration has made primary and secondary education completely free, even in a challenged environment with a restricted Treasury. Our first budget delivered free education for all our children, especially children from disadvantaged and underprivileged families.

We have a debate going on in Zambia at the moment where colleagues in the opposition are saying that our policy of free education has failed. Why? Because of over-enrolment in classrooms. There are more pupils than ever before.

We have responded by saying that this is clear evidence that children who were not in school before the free education policy are now attending school.

Our challenge now is to buy more desks and build more classroom space, and we are committed to doing that.

Coupled with free education, we have also increased the Constituency Development Fund to decentralise resource allocation and match local priorities in constituencies across the country. The people themselves will decide what is a priority for development in their areas.

Our government has allocated resources to allow them to implement those developmental priorities. This had never happened before.

Just to give you a contrast, 11 months ago the Constituency Development Fund was 1.6 million kwacha. In our first budget, we increased this to 25.7 million kwacha per constituency, to be decided upon by local people. This is fundamentally life-changing in our country.

Let me comment a little on our economy and Zambia-EU cooperation.

The performance of the Zambian economy over the last decade has been on a downward trajectory. Rising costs of basic commodities, fuel, inflation and poor economic policies left our economy on its knees before we took office.

Our country, with so much wealth and potential, was reduced to abject poverty. This is unacceptable 58 years after independence.

Repairing, restoring and reviving our economy will be the main marker of our government's performance. We want to make sure that our people come first. As public servants, we are here to serve, not to be served.

This is our priority and the bedrock upon which we want to develop policy.

We are committed to becoming a more productive and industrious country. Zambia has enormous capacity to produce quality goods and services for the EU and other regional and global markets. We therefore seek favourable trade and investment relationships with Europe for mutual benefit.

Small and medium enterprises are crucial to us in this regard. We want them to become part of the building blocks for our economic revival.

We look to you, our partners, to work with us in establishing financial assistance packages that support research, development, technology and skills that will create new and sustainable Zambian SMEs.

We also look to working with the EU to improve access to credit for SMEs through initiatives such as the Global Investment Package, which will lead to increased industrialisation, agricultural production, manufacturing, trade and sustainable energy sources.

This is the surest and most sustainable way of creating meaningful employment and diversifying our economy.

We are encouraged by the first Zambia-EU Economic Forum, which we recently held in Lusaka under the theme "Economic Transformation through Green Growth". It was the first of its kind between Zambia and the EU and we are highly encouraged by it.

This important engagement brought together entrepreneurs, corporate institutions and financial institutions from Europe working with our own people and enterprises in Zambia. We expect it to become an annual event because we must ensure continuity of the progress made.

This is in line with our recognition of the private sector as a key driver of our economy, with government support.

Our government wishes to leverage these initial steps and ensure that red tape and other barriers are removed.

Our economy is open for business. Zambia is back in business. As you would say in football here in Europe, we are back in the Champions League.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me address food insecurity and climate change.

As the world faces critical shortages of key agricultural produce and we witness the devastating effects of food insecurity in Africa and beyond, Zambia is well placed and aims to be a major contributor towards addressing food insecurity around the world.

I am pleased to note that Zambia and the EU have increasingly collaborated in agricultural endeavours and we welcome more collaboration in this important sector.

Zambia has the potential to be part of the solution to food instability in our region and we intend to work with you to realise this potential.

We urge our European partners collectively and individually to come on board and explore the numerous opportunities for joint investments in Zambia's agricultural sector. We have huge potential, good agronomic conditions, fertile soils, fresh water and a suitable climate for food production.

As we increase our agricultural and industrial output, we are cognisant of our responsibility to do so sustainably. This is why our government is taking concrete steps to harness Zambia's potential to develop renewable energy as well as sustainable agriculture to mitigate the devastating impacts of climate change.

We have created the first-ever Ministry for Green Economy and the Environment in our country's history to dedicate efforts towards sustainability as we pursue agriculture and green energy development.

We are keen to leverage these areas and create joint investment opportunities between yourselves and ourselves.

Honourable Members, in pursuit of our economic transformation, we look to cooperating with our European partners. While we appreciate development support, we look forward to more partnerships, greater investment and trade. This is the most sustainable way to work together and Zambia is up to the task.

Let me address the issue of migration.

Africa and the EU must take advantage of the skilled human capital available on both continents. We are talking about skills from women and skills from our youth. These are highly desired because they provide labour for longer periods and contribute to economic growth.

Africa and Europe have a lot in common. Our people have much to learn from one another. Africa and Europe have traded with each other for centuries.

It is important that easing the movement of labour between our continents contributes to peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, improves the flow of information and brings about new innovations.

Putting in place more agreements and easing the movement of people between our regions will also help reduce illegal and negative migration. No one wants illegal migration, but we must open up formally so that people can move legally.

At the moment, movement of people from Europe to Zambia is easier than movement from Zambia to Europe. We need to look at this situation together and address migration challenges from the source by working together proactively.

Ladies and gentlemen, we stand ready to channel our resources and energies towards achieving the benefits that are ready to be unlocked through collaboration with yourselves.

We as a country are open for business. Zambia is ready to transact with yourselves.

We are striving to deal with one of our major inherited challenges, which is debt. We are very grateful for the support that the European Union has rendered to Zambia in unlocking our debt situation.

We are pleased that on the 16th of June, the first creditors' meeting under the Common Framework took place. We want to congratulate and thank France and the People's Republic of China, who co-chaired the meeting.

We thank the European Union for your support and ask that you continue supporting us in resolving our debt crisis.

Peace and security are also important issues.

Zambia has been a bastion of peace and stability in our region and continent since independence. We aim to maintain this distinguished reputation as we continue to participate in efforts to restore peace in troubled regions of Southern Africa and the African continent at large.

Zambia remains actively involved in ongoing operations in Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique, where there is extremism. Zambia also remains engaged on issues surrounding the conflict between eastern DRC and Rwanda.

As the world grapples with instability in various regions, we wish to express our government's concern regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine.

It is tragic and heartbreaking to witness thousands of lives lost and millions displaced unnecessarily as a result of an altogether avoidable conflict.

While we stand by those directly affected by the war, there have been far-reaching consequences arising from this conflict, particularly on food security, fertiliser and other commodities.

Food prices, fuel prices and fertiliser prices are challenging our own economic reconstruction efforts and driving up the cost of living, affecting the poorest most severely.

War is not what we need anywhere.

We categorically say no to war in Ukraine and elsewhere. We continue to urge the parties directly and indirectly involved to resolve these matters through negotiation.

As I stated in my maiden address to the African Union Assembly in February this year, "Instability anywhere is instability everywhere."

We prefer to channel all our resources, energy and time towards resolving conflicts in all regions of the world. We should focus on improving the lives of our people everywhere in our interconnected world instead of waging wars.

We must focus our energies on improving the welfare of children, women, differently abled people and disadvantaged communities rather than engaging in wars across the world.

Honourable Members of the distinguished European Parliament, in conclusion, I wish once more to express profound gratitude for the support you rendered personally to me in my difficult times and to the people of Zambia during the dark days in our democratic development.

We also wish to thank the European Parliament for the incredible honour and privilege of addressing this esteemed House today.

We are grateful because we know you are busy and yet you allowed us to address you and listened to us.

Zambia's partnership with the EU is built on a strong foundation of mutual respect, shared values and belief in the core tenets of democracy.

We look forward to growing this partnership significantly in the years to come and we are confident of the benefits that our joint efforts will yield for our people in Zambia and indeed in the European Union.

I thank you for your kind attention. Thank you.