

**NATURAL RESOURCES AND CONFLICT IN AFRICA:
TRANSFORMING A PEACE LIABILITY INTO A PEACE ASSET**

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Opening Remarks

By

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Excellency Abou Gheit, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Friends and Colleagues,

I would like to begin by formally acknowledging the presence here of the distinguished Foreign Minister of the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Hon. Mr. Abou Gheit. I would also like to express on behalf of the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, and indeed on the behalf of the entire United Nations, our deep appreciation and profound thanks to the Government and people of Egypt for graciously hosting the meeting and for the warm hospitality that we are enjoying here in Cairo.

Allow me to recall that Egypt was one of a handful of independent African countries that signed the original Charter of the United Nations, and has always been at the center of the multilateral diplomacy in both Africa and the Arab world. She was a founding member of and has remained an active key participant in, both the Non Aligned Movement as well as the Group of 77. Africa takes pride in the fact that Egypt gave the world the first African Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr. Boutros-Boutros Ghali. Through the good work of the Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation, she has for many years been training African policemen, agriculturalists and many other professionals.

Egypt has always played a central role in promoting and supporting the African agenda, from the days of the national liberation struggle, through Africa's ongoing efforts to achieve peace and unity, to the current focus on economic and social development within the context of NEPAD. Our gathering here today in Cairo to discuss the important subject of natural resources and their role in conflict, is therefore entirely appropriate and very much in the long tradition of Egyptian activism and positive engagement.

Africa is well known as home to some of the largest deposits of natural resources in the entire world. Nigeria, Angola, Algeria and Libya together produce a substantial portion of the world's crude oil; South Africa and several other African countries are a major

source of the world's gold output; Botswana, the DRC, and Sierra Leone are major sources of diamonds, while other strategic minerals such as chrome, coltan, bauxite and manganese are major export products from a number of African countries. A good proportion of the world's tropical hard wood, coffee, cocoa and rubber exports are produced in Africa. The foreign exchange earnings from these and other natural resources constitute a major source of Africa's income.

But unfortunately, today, in much of eastern DRC, the illegal exploitation of natural resources is contributing to continuing violence and instability. In Liberia, the illegal exploitation of timber and other natural resources similarly help to fuel that country's civil war, now thankfully at an end. In Angola, the illegal exploitation of diamond resources was a major source of funding for the UNITA rebellion. These and other examples illustrate the negative role that natural resources have played in a number of African conflicts. Several UN reports have in recent years tried to assemble the facts about this phenomenon.

Our purpose in this expert groups meeting is to shed further light on the subject by bringing together a number of experts for a real and serious policy dialogue as to how to convert what has hitherto often been a peace liability into an asset. We hope that in the course of our discussions here, the many complex issues relating to the role of natural resources in African conflicts will be substantively addressed, and that hopefully we will be able to come up with some specific recommendations for the future.

I am particularly pleased that a number of high-level government representatives are here with us today to enrich our discussions because the perspective of governments the issue at hand in Africa must be at the very centre of our deliberations. In this regard, I recognize the distinguished Deputy Foreign Minister of Liberia, the Honourable Commany Wesseh. It is governments who set the regulatory environment and provide licenses for the exploitation of natural resources. But we also recognize that a meaningful discussion requires the active participation of the full range of the other stakeholders, such as the

private sector and civil society, including the NGOs. In this context, I am pleased that several of these other stakeholders are also here represented.

Distinguished delegates, my appeal is that our deliberations should focus on drawing the necessary lessons of the tragic experiences of the past, so that we can help to build a better tomorrow. Our aim should be to identify best practices, to pinpoint useful practical approaches, which will help post-conflict African countries, working in close and effective collaboration with the appropriate international institutions such as the UN, to improve their capacity to use their natural resources to consolidate the peace and accelerate development.

Thank you,