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Excellencies, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is once again a great pleasure and an honour for me to have the opportunity to speak to you in my capacity as Facilitator of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) at this fifth meeting of the COMIFAC Council of Ministers. This meeting is a **crucially important event** for COMIFAC, given that the decisions made here and the recommendations adopted will shape the development and the future of the sub-regional organisation decisively for a longer period.

As you are all aware, the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) was established in 2002 at Johannesburg with a view to supporting the efforts made by your individual countries to ensure the conservation and sustainable management of the rich forest ecosystems of the Congo Basin. The effectiveness of this support based on partnership depends largely on the effectiveness of COMIFAC, whose destiny is entirely in your hands. The heads of state of Central Africa have, for their part, put in place sound and visible beacons to guide our actions. The beacons include in particular the treaty establishing COMIFAC and the Plan de Convergence. This august body has already adopted the operationalisation details of this plan. The implementation of the convergence plan (Plan de Convergence), however, depends not only on each member country accepting ownership, but also on the vitality of the sub-regional partner institutions of COMIFAC: the Conference on Central African Moist-Forest Ecosystems (CEFDHAC), the Agency for the Development of Environmental Information (ADIE), the Organisation for the Conservation of African Wildlife (OCFSA), the Network of Protected Areas in Central Africa (RAPAC) and the African Timber Organization ATO/OAB). Implementation will also depend in no small way on the effective establishment of an **independent financing mechanism**. The pertinent feasibility studies were conclusive.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Central African sub-region is already the recipient of important **financial assistance** from development partners, some members of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) and some non-members, with significantly more assistance in the pipeline. This aid is designed to support the development of the forest sector in the form of projects and programmes assisted by bilateral cooperation and several multi-stakeholder funds which are being established.

It is within this framework that the Congo Basin Forest Fund (CBFF), with financing provided by the United Kingdom and Norway, has just made available 200 million US dollars for the sub-region, through the AfDB which is assisting the Administrative Council with the operational management. I am delighted to note that the CBFF explicitly makes reference to the convergence plan and that it fits within the framework of the CBFP. To ensure that the management conforms to this, the acting President of COMIFAC is a full member of the Administrative Council, while the CBFP Facilitator and the Executive Secretary of COMIFAC have observer status and take part in the discussions.

But all these aids can in no way replace an independent financing mechanism to ensure the regular, sustainable operation of these sub-regional partner institutions, which are together the showcase of COMIFAC. The Council of Ministers must then make the most of the opportunity posed by this meeting to further clarify the relations which ought to exist between **COMIFAC and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)**, thank to the decision to make COMIFAC, a specialised agency of the ECCAS. All clarifications, I should add at this juncture, also interest our development partners.

The CBFP is also intended to help the Central African states make their voices heard within the international dialogue on forests, and to help them defend the interests of the sub-region within the framework of **international negotiations** on this topic. I think we can legitimately congratulate ourselves for the progress made in these fields by various working groups put in place by the CBFP and COMIFAC to follow up major conventions. Special mention should be made of the working group on climate with the REDD process (reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation), the working group on desertification, and the working group on biodiversity, to give but three examples.

However, the work is far from finished, and we will need to make major additional efforts, ensuring effective cooperation between the ministries responsible for the environment.

We would also like to draw your attention to the many offers of support which are currently jockeying for place in Central Africa in the **conservation of forest resources**. Some of these do not appear to respect the priorities of the countries of the sub-region as laid out in the Plan de Convergence, which calls specifically for forest development to reconcile the development imperatives of a country with the need for conservation. This essential balancing of interests seems to be reflected in the ongoing concessions, which are covering an ever increasing area, and in the process of certification which guarantees compliance with the principles of sustainable management and socio-economic concerns. However, to go from there to the demand that all production concessions be transformed into conservation concessions or community forests, even if sustainable management methods are used, is a step that the CBFP will find difficult to take.

Even if all these heated debates could be held country by country, we are convinced that only the **joint positions** of all countries in the sub-region can be effectively defended. It is also in the interests of COMIFAC and its partner institutions within the Global Environmental Fund (GEF), the CBFF, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) and other funds announced, including the Climate Investment Funds.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that this meeting of the Council of Ministers will help further strengthen the **credibility of COMIFAC** vis à vis the outside world, by the commitment of member countries to the principles laid down in the Yaoundé Declaration and the high level of professionalism of the Executive Secretariat which is responsible for coordinating and monitoring the activities under the convergence plan.

Before I come to the end of my address I would like to pay a well-earned tribute to **Ms Yvonne Mboissona, Minister of the Central African Republic**, who is preparing to take over the acting presidency of COMIFAC. Her dynamic style gives us good reason to expect a rosy future for this institution. I know I speak for the partners when I pledge her all the support we can offer to ensure the success of her vitally important mission.

Long live international cooperation!

Thank you.