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Statement delivered by South African Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ms Sue van der Merwe at the General Debate (Agenda Item 5) during the Sixth Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, 21 February 2006

Honourable Chair

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen

Please allow me on behalf of the South African delegation to congratulate our host, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the excellent way in which this occasion has been organized. Thank you also for the hospitalities extended to all delegates since our arrival in Tehran. South Africa looks forward to fruitful discussions together with our partners from the region regarding the future direction of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC).

Ladies and gentlemen

Next year, it will be ten years since the inauguration of the Association in Mauritius in March 1997. It might therefore be appropriate for us to take stock of our achievements thus far, as well as to adjust the way we work wherever necessary to improve our capacity to achieve our objectives.

As we were listening to the outgoing Chairperson's report on the Fifth Meeting of the Council of Ministers that took place in Colombo in 2004, we are once again made aware of the enormous economic potential of the Indian Ocean Rim. This potential has been illustrated by many commentators, acknowledging amongst others that the Indian Ocean carries half of the world's container ships, one third of the bulk cargo traffic and two thirds of the

world's oil shipments. The Indian Ocean Rim is also rich in resources, ranging from food fisheries to precious minerals, from agricultural wealth to valuable human technical expertise. Most importantly, the Indian Ocean Rim represents a population of close to two billion people, making it a massive market. The strategic value of the Indian Ocean Rim, therefore, is beyond doubt as it constitutes an enormous asset to international traders, governments and fishing communities alike.

During the colonial period, many Member States have had first hand experience of the importance that colonial powers attached to trading routes along our coastlines and across the Indian Ocean; and in the book "Empires of the Monsoon: A History of the Indian Ocean and its Invaders", author Richard Hall recalls contacts between Asia and Africa from the pre-colonial period and how the monsoons drove a flourishing trade along our common shores.

Ladies and gentlemen

The tragic consequences of natural disasters that have devastated the Indian Ocean Rim recently, as well as the real threat of the spread of avian flu which has already reached the shores of member states, have taught us the value and importance of regional integration and cooperation. However, the potential of the Indian Ocean Rim remains untapped or underutilized to the peoples of our countries. As Member States of the Indian Ocean Rim representing mainly the developing world, it is our shared responsibility to vigorously promote South-South cooperation in the spirit of multilateralism to the mutual benefit of all. South Africa looks forward to further discussing with our Rim partners issues such as the mitigation of natural disasters and the establishment of early warning systems; maritime cooperation; building on the academic and research capacity exchange; and, most importantly, the promotion of trade and investment.

South Africa is eager to see that this Association makes tangible progress on its path to unlock regional potential and deliver positive outcomes. We are

especially keen to strengthen the Rim's institutional capacity to achieve this. I would like to propose that we look at some of the following issues as a matter of urgency:

South Africa's position is that the role of the IOR-ARC Chair is vital for the work of the Association. The Chair's mandate to monitor the progress of identified projects and programmes should be clearly spelled out to ensure effective communication between identified project champions and the Executive Director. We believe that the Chair's role needs to be a leadership role.

The role of the Executive Director should also be strengthened to enable her or him to effectively carry out the work of the Secretariat. Our belief is that the Executive Director's mandate should enable her or him to represent the Association at key international meetings to raise the Rim's global image; she or he should present quarterly progress reports on deliverables to all members; and this person should be supported with the necessary resources to ensure delivery.

In this regard South Africa is committed to make its contribution by seconding an official to Mauritius this year to augment the capacity of the secretariat to deliver our joint programmes.

Ladies and Gentlemen

You are all aware of the current lack of funding for projects and programmes, such as academic research and exchange. South Africa is of the view that our programmes and projects must be based on reliable and dependable information. Therefore, South Africa welcomes the establishment of the proposed Special Fund, ideally to be funded by a predictable source of income. The Special Fund would enable the Association to carry out its tasks in a much more informed manner, as well as to provide a platform from where our Dialogue Partners could be engaged to participate or contribute to selected projects and programmes. South Africa is fully aware and sensitive

to the reality of Member States' limited human and financial resources, and obligations to important other regional organizations.

In this regard, ladies and gentlemen, Member States will remember the Africa-Asia Summit that took place in Jakarta during April last year and the subsequent adoption of the New Africa-Asia Strategic Partnership (NAASP). This was the 50th anniversary of the historic Bandung Summit in 1955 which established Afro-Asian solidarity. It is this bond between our nations on which we need to capitalize.

Delegates will be aware, that as Africans we are committed to an African Renaissance in an effort to rid our continent of its historic economic backlogs. Africa has already embarked upon a continental initiative, home grown and African lead, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

Joint African-Asian initiatives offer unlimited potential for equitable participation and sharing in the benefits of the global economy. The challenge to us as Member States of the Indian Ocean Rim is therefore to see the creation of this inter-continental initiative as complimentary to our Indian Ocean Rim activities and programmes and as an opportunity to create synergy between the two regional initiatives to the benefit of all.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen

Allow me to reiterate South Africa's appreciation to Iran for hosting this occasion. May our deliberations as well as our future actions be targeted and productive. And, although, as Hall said in Empires of the Monsoon which I mentioned earlier "The monsoons no longer dictate when ships can travel the Indian Oceans yet their rhythms still pervade the lives of two billion people throughout the Indian sub-continent, from East Africa to Malaysia. The Indian Ocean is reviewing its status as a 'zone of encounters and contacts and a crossroads of cultures..."

We, as Member States, own this Association. At this stage, however, we need to raise its international profile, rebuild confidence in its operations and we need to reinvigorate its enormous potential to our collective gain.

I thank you.