



Rabat, 6 March 2012

Press Release

Opening of the 27th session of North Africa Intergovernmental Committee of Experts
The need for change: Increasing competitiveness and rethinking regional integration

The 27th session of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts of the Office for North Africa, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, began in Rabat (Morocco) and was enhanced by the presence of Mr. Nizar Baraka, Minister of Economy and Finance. Participants included high-level representatives of Member States (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, the Sudan and Tunisia), as well as national and international experts, representatives of regional and international organizations, the private sector, the civil society, the academia and the media. The topic for discussion this year which is in line with that of the Conference of Ministers of ECA to be held late March in Addis Ababa, is of special interest for North Africa, especially in the current context marked by an economic slowdown and strong social demands.

How to release the potential of North Africa as a center of growth and competitiveness, what would be the contribution of the sub-region in this area, and what would be its role to insure the economic recovery in Africa and the world ? These are some of the questions to be considered by the experts meeting in Rabat from 6 to 9 March, 2012.

Speaking at the opening of the meeting, Ms. Karima Bounemra Ben Soltane, Director of the ECA Office for North Africa, stated that North African countries face many common challenges particularly related to the decline in foreign direct investment following the ongoing effects of the global financial and economic crisis. This crisis had a direct impact on the creation of new jobs in the region especially for young people.

This difficult economic situation was exacerbated by the economic downturn in countries that have experienced popular uprisings that led to government change in some countries and also to high social demands which ensued, calling for better governance and reduced inequality and vulnerability. The objective of this meeting will provide opportunities for member states to reflect together on ways to address these challenges and ensure the necessary conditions for stronger and sustained growth and development, generating employment and income.

While raising these issues, the Secretary General of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), Mr. Habib Ben Yahia, stressed that the revival of the Union will strengthen regional integration and economic cooperation between the Maghreb countries. He welcomed in this regard, the encouraging results of UMA meeting of the Committee of Ministers held in Rabat on February 18, which has given new impetus to the Maghreb Union. He focused on identified priority areas of cooperation, including support to SMEs-SMI and promotion of sectors with high growth potential such as renewable energy.

Mr. Ben Yahia also reiterated the commitment of the UMA to increase trade among member countries and accelerate the integration process to reduce unemployment, especially of youth and women, and address key challenges including those related to food security, the fight against desertification and adaptation to climate change.

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Mr. Nizar Baraka, Minister of Economy and Finance of Morocco, for his part, focused on the potential that is available in African in terms of growth and resilience to external shocks. However, he deplored the persistence of significant disparities between countries with different levels of development. He rightly stressed in this regard the important role that North Africa can play in the transformation process and economic diversification across the continent, with a view to increasing foreign direct investment and making it a real growth area worldwide.

According to the report on economic and social conditions that prevailed in North Africa in 2011, presented by the Office of the ECA in this meeting, the global and regional context has been marked by the persisting effects of the global financial and economic crisis, accentuated by the sovereign debt crisis that some European countries have been going through and that had a negative impact on the economies of member States. Hence, the need for comprehensive upgrading of the economies to increase their competitiveness on the regional and international levels, and greater integration and regional cooperation.

The report recommends for 2012 the implementation of more efficient social policies geared towards most vulnerable groups, strengthening the decentralization process, reducing inequalities, economic diversification towards high value added products to ensure sustainable growth and meet an increasing demand for jobs.

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