

**African Statesmen Initiative Symposium:
Leadership and Democratization
Opening Ceremony
June 6, 2005**

**Remarks by Kenneth Wollack,
President, National Democratic Institute**

President Toure, Your Excellencies, the former heads of state from 14 countries on the African continent, Prime Ministers Campbell, Roman and Al-Mahdi from the Club of Madrid, ASI supporters from Africa, Europe, the United States and from the United Nations, members of the Malian government and civil society, distinguished participants, guests, observers and members of the media. It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to the inaugural gathering of the African Statesmen Initiative. I am Ken Wollack, president of the National Democratic Institute, an international organization based in Washington, DC dedicated to the advancement of democratic values, institutions and processes worldwide.

The ASI was first conceived almost four years ago by former African leaders and through extensive consultations with Chris Fomunyoh, NDI's Senior Associate for Africa. My institute is proud to have played a supporting role in helping to bring this idea to fruition. To give you an idea how long ASI has been in the making, Chris Fomunyoh first consulted with President Toure not as a prospective host of the inaugural gathering, but as a participant in the initiative—he was a former president at the time.

The ASI initiative was born out of a simple idea: that there now exists a significant group of former political leaders on the continent who have contributed to the economic, social and political development in their respective countries and who can continue to address—collectively and individually—African problems, ranging from conflict resolution and peace-building to good elections and governance, and to mobilize efforts against the ravages of deadly diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.

Consider this one stark reminder of the changing political face of Africa. Between 1960 and 1980, only three African presidents or prime ministers retired voluntarily or left office after losing an election. Since 1990, that figure has risen to 32. While many of these former leaders already serve as role models for their successors and have already been involved in regional humanitarian and democratization efforts, the challenge today is how to best mobilize their skills and experience to help meet pressing continental and international challenges.

At the heart of NDI's work is bringing people together with diverse experiences and expertise to share what they know and what they have learned. This international solidarity network has demonstrated that democratic progress is inseparable from democratic cooperation. In this growing interdependent world, we are responsible for each other as events in one nation can impact, for good or for evil, events in other nations. We must use our interconnectedness as a force for mutual support, as a strategic weapon for peace. That is our common humanity. Each failure averted will avert others.

Now, to be brutally frank, to much of the uninformed outside world, Africa is often portrayed as a vast continent dominated by autocrats and mired in conflict, poverty, disease and corruption. But those sitting around this table offer a different optic through which this continent should be viewed. Without minimizing all the problems—and they are real and significant—the Africa of today is in fact a mosaic where political leadership—both governing and opposition—and civil society are beginning to build what Salim Salim calls the "architecture" for democratic change. To be successful, however, the effort must tap all the talent this continent has to offer. President Kennedy once said that democracy is not a final achievement but a call to an untiring effort. That may describe best what brings us together.

We at NDI recognize, however, that the ASI does not operate in isolation—complementing initiatives have come before us and others will follow. We have learned from the President Carter-led Council of Presidents and Prime Ministers of the Americas. We have cooperated with Ambassador Stith's extraordinary program for former African leaders at Boston University, and observed and worked closely with the Club of Madrid, which in a few short years has brought former leaders together to help resolve conflict in most every region of the world. We are aware of new initiatives being discussed, such as the "Council of Elders" by NEPAD, and within the Commonwealth. The ASI can both contribute to and benefit from all of these ongoing and future efforts.

President Mbeki characterized this process in a different context when he described the development of South Africa's new constitution. "Our sense of elation," he said, "derives from the fact that this magnificent product is the unique creation of African hands and African minds. But it also constitutes a tribute to our loss of vanity that we could, despite the temptation to treat ourselves as an exceptional fragment of humanity, draw on the accumulated experience and wisdom of all humankind, to define for ourselves what we want to be."

Let me conclude by thanking those who generously have given their support to the ASI initiative. They are the Government of Mali, which has done so much to welcome us, the Club of Madrid, the Institute for Multi-Party Democracy in the Netherlands, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Government of Germany, the African Center for Strategic Studies, the National Endowment for Democracy, the

Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the Open Society Institute/West Africa and USAID.

Finally, I would like to note a serious deficiency in the ASI-and that is the absence of women. There has not been a female head of state in Africa. Let us hope that as ASI evolves, you will be forced to expand the initials to ASSI, the African Statesmen and Stateswomen Initiative.

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce Abdoulie Janneh, the Regional Director for Africa of the UNDP. NDI is proud to have partnered with the UNDP in so many places around the world. All of us know and appreciate the role the UNDP plays in the issues we will be discussing during this forum.