

Statement of USTR Robert Lighthizer at the Opening Ceremony of the 2018 U.S.-Sub-Saharan Africa Trade and Economic Cooperation Forum (AGOA Forum)

Ambassador Lighthizer:

Good morning, ministers and distinguished guests. I join Deputy Secretary Sullivan in welcoming you all to the 17th AGOA Ministerial and to Washington, DC.

As has been said, this is my second Forum. Last year, I had the privilege of leading the U.S. delegation to the AGOA Forum in Lome, Togo.

Bernadette [Legzim-Balouki, Togolese Minister of Trade and Private Sector Promotion] and her team did a fabulous job. It was a wonderful visit. I got to meet the President, which was a great honor, and I had the opportunity to talk with him. And I began the process of learning about Africa. I hope to continue that learning process here today. It's not that I was a complete novice to Africa, but there is an enormous amount to learn, and an enormous amount of ignorance, so it's very important that I continue the process, and I look forward to that.

I also had the opportunity to meet with many of you, and I look forward to renewing those conversations.

It was during that visit that I observed how important the United States' trade and economic relationship is with Africa.

The opportunities I have had since that trip to talk with American companies and African leaders about doing business on the Continent have only confirmed the importance of this relationship to me.

I can assure you that this Administration is strongly committed to Africa. We want to deepen our trade ties so that workers and businesses throughout the United States and across Africa can benefit as much as possible.

As you all know and has been said here already, Africa has some of the fastest growing economies in the world and a rapidly expanding middle class. These trends should result in increased demands for American products and services, and the U.S. private sector has taken notice.

We're seeing this play out in many tangible ways. More small and medium-sized U.S. companies are doing business on the Continent—often directly with African businesses, not just with governments and state-owned enterprises. These companies are branching out into new sectors such as information technology and service industries.

AGOA has provided an important framework for our economic engagement during these last two decades. But by 2025—when AGOA is set to expire—it will be a quarter century old, and we cannot predict what will happen at that time.

We should seize the moment by pursuing a new, forward-looking vision for the future of U.S.-African trade. This vision should recognize that sub-Saharan Africa looks very different in 2018 than it did in 2000 when AGOA was first created. We believe that there are countries in Africa that are ready to move from AGOA beneficiary to U.S. free trade agreement partner.

We hope we can work with a willing partner to create an agreement that can serve as a template for additional deals on the continent. Doing so would build on the success of AGOA and reinforce the larger project of regional economic integration with Africa.

I look forward during these meetings to continuing this conversation, to gaining your thoughts on how we can proceed, and, as I say, learning more about Africa.

Thank you very much, and welcome again to the AGOA Forum.