STATEMENT ON COMMEMORATION OF 2021 WORLD ENVIRONMENTAL DAY (WED)
A CALL TO ACTION

On this day on the World Environment Day, the African Council of Religious Leaders-Religions for Peace affirm our continuous commitment for the protection of the environment by promoting moral responsibility towards mother Earth as embedded in the theme of this day and our role in achieving ecosystem restoration.

We applaud efforts by world leaders globally, regionally and at national levels for their efforts and progress made in articulating the developmental and ecological needs of the world including the need for Ecosystem Restoration. We particularly commend the UN General Assembly Resolution 73/284 - the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021 – 2030 and the Pan-African Action Agenda on Ecosystem Restoration for Increased Resilience.

Taking cognizance of the dependence of communities in Africa on our ecosystem for our daily basic needs, livelihoods and survival; and the essence of the Earth’s ecosystems for sustainable development, poverty alleviation and as a basis of human prosperity and well-being. We express a state of profound concern for the degradation of the ecosystems whose services gift us the essentials of life on Earth. Nature is under attack with the destruction of our fragile ecosystem. Of great concern is the havoc caused on water, land and homes threatening lives of marginalized communities in Africa.

We commit to continue to undertake our responsibility to capitalize on our strength of spirituality, uniqueness and mobilization to transform people’s behavior using our holy scriptures and hinged on values. Social and societal transformation is possible and ecosystem restoration is possible.

We recognize the Paris Agreement as an international treaty on climate change adopted by 196 states with a goal to limit global warming to well below 2°C, compared to pre-industrial levels. We are aware that in 2020, countries submitted their plans for climate action known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and that more countries, and companies are establishing carbon neutrality targets with zero-carbon solutions becoming competitive across economic sectors representing 25% of emissions. We recognize that there remains a significant gap between longer-term carbon neutrality and the commitments undertaken in the NDCs, which need to be addressed.

We reiterate the importance of industrial countries to meet their financial commitments to finance alternative pathways to development and in accordance with the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities” set out in the UNFCCC Convention to implement their objectives through assisting developing country State Parties with financial resources through a variety of actions, including supporting country-driven strategies with consideration on the needs and priorities of the developing country State Parties.
The travel bans and economic slowdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, positively impacted with a drop by 6% on greenhouse gas emissions, an improvement that is only temporary as climate change is not on pause. We are concerned that emissions are expected to return to higher levels as global economies begin to recover.

We express the need for transformative action to be undertaken in the next decade to completely phase out fossil fuel production and transition our economies to 100% renewable energy to successfully limit global warming to 1.5°C, and reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

We understand from scientific evidence that ‘By 2050 there will be a tonne of plastic for every tonne of fish’, if the current primary environmental problem caused by plastic pollution is not aggressively addressed. The plastics production process is a leading cause of carbon emissions contributing to global warming with more than 90% of plastics being produced from fossil fuel resources.

We support the crucial contribution of sustainable consumption and production towards substantial poverty alleviation and the transition towards low-carbon and green economies.

We recognize that outdated and unsustainable patterns of development, production and consumption are driving degradation of nature with the current consumption of resources exceeding the planet’s capacity for generation.

We recall the 17th Ordinary Session of AMacen in 2019 held under the theme ‘Taking action for Environmental Sustainability and Prosperity in Africa’ that committed to replicate, scale up and use circular economy approaches as part of Africa’s transformation efforts as contained in AU Agenda 2063.

We are also deeply concerned that tropical deforestation drives climate change, species loss, and poverty; protecting rainforests is part of an enormous moral obligation that includes social and economic justice, respect for human rights to achieve peace and security. More than two billion hectares of the world’s deforested and degraded landscapes offer potential for restoration. The rampant destruction of the Congo Basin rainforest is a blight to all faiths and spiritual traditions. It is driving species loss, deepening poverty, undermining sustainable development, creating conflict and insecurity, and robbing humanity of the best solution we have to climate change.

We recognize that faiths can add unique value to government, civil society and business efforts to protect rainforests. Ending tropical deforestation is both a profound moral responsibility and highly achievable.

We issue an urgent appeal for partnerships with stakeholders in Africa to encourage deforestation-free lifestyles and business practices, remain engaged in developing policies within the Congo Basin that protect rainforests and the rights of indigenous peoples to reach the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement.

With the loss of habitat for farming, mining and urban developments we have decreased natural space for wildlife resulting in an estimated one million plants and animal species being threatened with extinction. Illegal wildlife trade continues to pose danger to biodiversity. We recognize the work done under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
of wildlife fauna and flora (CITES) hosted by UNEP which regulates trade in animals and plants to prevent overexploitation. However, much more needs to be done to prevent mass extinction of flora and fauna that are key to ecosystem restoration.

Contaminated water is a major threat among communities in Africa. Every hour 115 people die in Africa from diseases linked with improper hygiene, poor sanitation and contaminated water according to the United Nations Office of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). A sustainable response to COVID-19 and the pandemics that will follow must include a focus on water and sanitation to meet Sustainable Development Goal 6.

The commemoration of the WED has come at a time when a natural catastrophic disaster has hit Goma, DRC causing deaths and displacements of local populations. This comes against a backdrop of 2 million people already displaced by brutal violence in North Kivu province. We commend the quick move by UNHCR and call upon the AU through the Africa Risk Capacity Instrument (ARC) to reach out to the people of Goma and provide support for safe and rapid resettlement and resumption of their economic activities.

In conclusion we Call for Action now on Ecosystem Restoration:

1. To reverse the trends of biodiversity loss and to increase ambition and accountability for its protection.

2. To protect the Congo Basin Rainforest and continuously promote greening of the Sahel region.

3. For governments in Africa to collaborate with CITES and utilize the support provided to strengthen environmental governance to combat illegal trade in wildlife.

4. For the promotion of the circular economy for its potential to improve the way goods and services are produced and consumed to reduce waste, create green jobs and contribute to SDG 12.

5. For religious leaders in Africa to stand in solidarity with indigenous peoples and forest communities, to offer sanctuary and protection from threats of intimidation, violence and incursion into and expulsion from their lands.

6. For governments to prioritize ending ecosystem degradation as an ethical priority embedded in implementable policies and laws standardized regionally and pledge to exert influence on the private sector and extractive industries.

7. On religious communities, from the grassroots to the most senior leadership, to join up with the coalition of indigenous, government, civil society, business and United Nations partners already working to protect all surface water including all of Africa’s shared waters.
8. Further demand for the adoption and promotion of renewable energy to curb fossil fuel extraction and reduce plastic production.

9. Call for more progressive mobilization of climate finance and increased financing to developing countries to implement the UNFCCC objectives.

10. Urgent action by governments to save lives and livelihoods to address the Covid-19 global pandemic through vaccination equity, the climate emergency and disaster management as they aggravate peace, security and economic sustainability.

May Almighty God give us the wisdom to chose the correct path and the strength to persevere in His will.

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His Eminence John Cardinal Onaiyekan
Co-Chair ACRL-RfP

His Eminence Sheikh Shaban Mubajje
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