President Paul Kagame this Wednesday held a Diplomats' Luncheon in Kigali and talked about integration and relations during the event.

Diplomats at the luncheon

Below are the full remarks of the President during the luncheon;

A good afternoon to you. I welcome you all to our traditional annual lunch. Let me start by wishing you a very happy and productive 2020. I think we are off to a good start. I trust you had an enjoyable holiday, and hope many of you decided to spend it here with us in Rwanda. We have new envoys who presented their credentials earlier today, as well as others who joined us over the past year. You are all most welcome. The start of this new decade is an important marker for Rwanda in many ways.

We are concluding one chapter of our development, Vision 2020, having achieved many of our goals. By the way, before I continue, let me go back a little bit and do something important I omitted. As I was wishing you a happy new year, I am doing it on behalf of our government and the people of Rwanda. I also intended to do it on behalf of my best other half. We normally host these lunches together with her. I just want to apologise on her behalf because she had to travel yesterday and couldn't be here with us. I hope you understand. But she asked me to pass along this message, and that's why I must apologise, having forgotten that. Along the way, we have gained valuable capabilities and experience for our ambition to transform Rwanda into a high-income economy by 2050. 2050 sounds far away from today, but it's only thirty years. Like those we have spent close to that, being here since 1994, somewhere in the middle.

Now, we still have a long way to go, but there is a good pace. There is no doubt about the importance of strong and productive cooperation, both in our region and with the rest of the world. I wish to thank you all for accompanying Rwandans on this journey. Later this year, Rwanda will be honoured to serve as host of the 26th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Our teams are working closely with the Commonwealth to ensure a successful summit. We are looking forward to your usual support. Related to that, we intend to make it even easier to visit Rwanda, by exempting citizens of the African Union, the Commonwealth, and the Francophonie from paying visa fees. We are going to do it even with some other countries that are not members of these stated organisations, so don't worry.

We have either taken care of that, or we will also take care of that. We want more people to visit us. I was going to say, we don't want more money but no, we want it. We are going to exempt only visa fees; the rest we want it. Of course, citizens of all other countries will continue to be eligible to obtain a visa on arrival, which has already been operational. Next month, Rwanda will hand over the chair of the East African Community. East African integration remains a priority. Now, earlier the dean of the diplomatic corps mentioned things we achieved as chair of the African Union. Thanks not only for the compliment, but also to you and through you to the Heads of State of Africa. They are really the ones who made my work easier. With them giving the support they did give to me, I couldn't afford to let them down. So that's why we made progress.

Apparently, leading the East African Community has become more difficult. Even with fewer countries, being the chair of the Community this past year, is more difficult than leading the whole continent, with so many countries. Well, I even find a lot of problems leading my own country, and it is just one country. So leading a community is assumed to be more difficult. Looking back the East African Community has really made good progress over the years. East Africans generally work together, and the East African Community Secretariat has served us well. Freedom of movement of goods and different things has gone well. I am sure you are aware of the challenge we had in our country with our neighbour, let me say neighbours, but particularly the neighbour to our north, which is Uganda.

But I think we are making progress as well, and we want to continue to make good progress. But there is always going to be work to do. You know, people talk a lot about integration. Integration has something that relates to borders. So currently we have some difficulties along our border. But looking at it, you would assume it is just the border. No, there is what causes the difficulties at the border. And I think those ones need to be paid more attention to. How did we come to the point where we had difficulties at the border? It's because of something else. We have to address something else, and by that we will be addressing the difficulties at the border. Even without borders – let's suppose borders were removed in the East African Community. For Rwanda, we have Tanzania to the east, Burundi to the south, DRC to the west, Uganda to the north. Let's assume we removed the borders.

By the way, even without borders, you still have neighbours. You know why? Because even within borders, just talking about Rwanda, within, we still have neighbours. Where I live, an hour away by road, I have a neighbour. If you remove the border, the one on this side of the borders becomes a neighbour. Then another

becomes a neighbour, and another, and another. Communities will always have neighbours. Why am I saying this? In my community, my home, we have neighbours around. Depending on how I treat my neighbour, or how the neighbour treats me, we can have freedom of movement, or a relationship, and so forth. But if my neighbour tells me, if I find you in my home compound, I will do something to you.

What that results into is you are now creating a border, a line between your home and mine. Just by the statement. If I am moving around and loitering and find myself in your compound, and you say this is a no-go area, don't step here. Stay in your place. You have already created a border between these families. This is what has happened between Rwanda and Uganda in the recent days. We have had hundreds of Rwandans arrested in Uganda. And we have raised this matter with Ugandan authorities. We have families of hundreds of families coming and appealing to us asking why you don't ask Uganda to release our people. And that matter has been raised with Uganda repeatedly, several times, by different layers of our administration. I myself travelled there. The families of these people in prison are asking me what I am doing to have their people released and brought back home.

These are people who travelled there for business, students studying there, all kinds of things. But nothing happened. In fact, what resulted into the so-called closure of the border — it is not really closed as such. I will tell you the facts and you will make your own conclusion. Because of that, we had to tell Rwandans that the only thing I can do now is tell you not to go to Uganda, those who have not been arrested yet. Just stop going there because if you go there, I have no control. They may arrest you, and your families will come to me and say you have been arrested. And there is nothing I can do about it. The only thing I can do is advise you not to go there. But we did not stop Ugandans from coming here. They have been coming. And the only border that is closed is Gatuna. Kagitumba and Cyanika and other places are being used. Recently something I would call progress happened. We went to Angola, with the President of Angola and the President of DRC, the four Heads of State.

We said what we wanted to say, and agreed later on that we would do something about it. Recently the progress is that some of the people who have been held in prison for months or years were released, nine of them. Well, if you add to others released before, maybe you get to twenty, but unfortunately some of them have been dying as they arrive back home. If you do a post-mortem you find they have been tortured very badly. Of the nine just released, a number are in hospitals; the

Minister of Health knows about that, they are being looked after. There are clear marks of torture. We get information that some of those who remain there have died. As that is happening, and I am calling it good progress – forget about the other stories of how they have been mistreated – the other side says, you see we have shown a good gesture. Now you must also do something. We say, what? Something that tells Rwandans to start traveling to Uganda.

And I asked one of the officials who came to see me and told me that: I can easily say that, make a statement that you released nine people, everything is okay, you can start going to Uganda. I told this official, suppose I start doing that, and the next day and another day more Rwandans are arrested and those still in custody are not released. Are you suggesting I would go tell these Rwandans, you know what, I was deceived. Again stop going there. So I told them, look, simply do us a favour. Just stop this thing with Rwandans because most of those arrested have no case, and if they have a case it hasn't been put to courts for months and  years. What kind of situation is this? Now, if you stop that first, and second, if you really stop associating with these groups you have been giving support to in order to destabilise our country, automatically the borders would be open. It's automatic. It's just a direct consequence, a result of the other.

I said,  the matter is simple. Not a question of saying I do that, you do that. No, for us it's one thing. What I am being asked to do is say Rwandans can start comfortably going to Uganda. That's what I am being asked. And I am holding on to that because I am not yet comfortable that I can tell Rwandans to start doing that. That they won't be arrested and relatives will then come tell me you put our relatives and friends into trouble. Soon we will be going back to Angola again to review progress where it has been made, and reasons for lack of it in other cases, but the situation is this. In the midst of all this, there is so much talk about integration. Yes, we can have as many lectures for as long as you want about integration, but integration of regions and communities does not happen just because you are making a slogan about it. No, it happens because you are doing the right thing which actually needs to be done in order for that to be realised. You can say people are closing borders, because borders are there. In other words, they shouldn't be there.

I completely agree with that statement. We shouldn't have even had borders. But for how  many decades have we had them? To remove them you must encourage good-neighbourly relations. Treat your neighbour as you want to be treated. Not just hunt people from the neighbouring country so badly, and then go back and say

these border issues are rubbish and nonsense. No, what is nonsense is what you do to your neighbour that actually creates that barrier. That's why I was saying, even if it's not a country neighbouring another country, it will be a family homestead neighbouring another family homestead. There will either be a barrier between one family and another, or there will be good cooperation and exchange and things will happen the way they should happen. It doesn't matter whether somebody else comes from another neighbouring country to praise you that you are the best person who has ever lived.

I have no problem with anybody being the best person that has ever lived. But we must see it. Somebody has to explain to me that it is because of these reasons that I am saying it. If you did, maybe you are right to praise this person, but you can't praise that person on my behalf because I don't agree with you. I don't agree that this person is the best person that has ever lived in this region because I have suffered because of him. Back in the past, I will also tell you, here in Rwanda we used to have so many grass-thatched homes that we called nyakatsi, which we have been replacing with roofing tile and so on. When you have so many grass-thatched houses next to each other, you don't want to play games of throwing fire because you might get burnt too.

When your neighbour's house catches fire, your own grass-thatched house may also catch fire. That's why cooperation is actually the best thing you can have. Not just somebody who could be praised for being the best person who has ever lived, but plays games of setting fire to other people's houses. When I talked of learning from experience, we have learnt from experience. We know how bad it is to burn people's houses or to hurt people. You know how much it costs. So for us we don't play those games of setting fire to other people's homes. But we invest ourselves and everything we have in trying to make sure that our homes and houses are well-protected, that they don't catch fire easily. And make sure that whoever wants to set fire to our houses will do it at a very huge cost to himself.

I've said too much, I didn't want to say this, but sometimes you need to release. This has been weighing on me and I needed to let it go. But there is much more to be done and we should be prepared to do our part, and I think the Luanda process will continue to be an important framework to address these issues, facilitated by the President of Angola and assisted by the Democratic Republic of Congo's President. Otherwise Rwanda appreciates the productive relations with our neighbouring country to the west. We have had troubled relations with that country for some time in the past.

There is now good collaboration on cross-border trade and joint infrastructure, as well as on public health emergencies between Rwanda and DRC. We commend the efforts of President Tshisekedi and the Congolese Armed Forces to stabilise Eastern Congo. This has produced very good results. We have already seen some of these groups that have been roaming from place to place, mainly between two of our neighbours. Some of them have been apprehended, they are here and they are facing the courts. So we appreciate the support of our partners in the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Globally, there continue to be political shifts in different parts of the world, to which Rwanda and Africa are neither immune, nor indifferent.

At the same time, we must sustain international collaboration on issues that affect us all, including climate change, global trade, and security. Rwanda will always stand ready to play our part. On that note, may I ask you, after I have found my glass, to find yours, and please join me in a toast: To peace, prosperity, and cooperation among all our nations. I thank you.

President Kagame making a toast with diplomats at the Annual Diplomats' Luncheon