

## **OPENING REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC AT THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF UNDERSTANDING, BAMAKO, MARCH 27, 2017**

“I would like first to extend the warmest welcome to all of the participants in the National Conference of Understanding. I would particularly like to thank those who traveled a long way to join us in this great inter-Malian dialogue. Their mobilisation once more bears witness to the fact that the daughters and sons of our country are never indifferent to the Nation’s interest.

We will not count! We will not count ourselves, because the family home is never too full to welcome each child of the same father and the same mother, the “Mother Country”. For me, being with all of you here today is a privilege beyond explanation, and at the same time a source of great pride. It buoys our hopes in the ability of our people to come together. Of course, there will always be a few names missing at roll call, for in the family home, there are always a few empty seats.

I remind those who are missing, and all others who were unable to be here, that this National Conference of Understanding is a train that is just beginning its journey. And those who have not boarded it at this station can always catch it at another station, another stop. The important thing is for the whole family to be reunited by the last stop. And at the last stop, the terminus of this voyage bears the name: National Understanding. How to thank those who are here? In particular those for whom family reunions are sacred, and who are always there, whether in rain or wind, even when they have grievances, because it is with one’s family that the dirty laundry is washed, and not with outsiders. An enormous thank you to those of you who have overcome your potential resentments, maybe even your rancor, to be here, because what is going to happen here is much more important than our grievances, whether large or small, much more essential than our states of mind. An enormous thank you, too, to those who are here and who will be criticized for being here by those for whom political adversaries are necessarily enemies. Thank you for your courage, Dear Sisters and Brothers!

A sad and affectionate thought for those who would have liked to be here, but who fear that they would pay too high a price, because that is the rule, in their party, their organization, the group of which they are members, for in their world, to greet and extend one’s hand to a brother with whom one disagrees is a betrayal. That which brings us together here is well and truly a National Conference of Understanding, where all disagreements should be settled, and all rancors should be overcome. If we do not meet here, where will we meet, one day?

We are all the children of the same mother, and our mother, to be clear, is a Mother Country and is named Mali, the Republic of Mali!

Of course, this elderly mother needs someone to care for her day and night, and that is a President, who happens to be, at present, myself. And believe me, this large family is exacting. To be worthy of being entrusted with caring for the Mother, it is better, in one’s behavior in the past and in the presence, to have proven one’s constancy and presence. In what family would one entrust the job of caring for an elderly mother to a

capricious son who leaves the house whenever he is unhappy, to an unfaithful daughter, who sulks and disappears every time she encounters a small annoyance?

Therefore, let us, by our exemplary behavior, our rigor, our faithfulness in all circumstances, merit the confidence of our family in taking care of our elderly mother, the State. Our egotism and our inconsistencies of today can easily disqualify us and render us unfit to care for our mother!

I will not cast the first stone. But may we all, in our soul and conscience, constantly ask ourselves how our behavior enriches democracy, how the acts that we perform contribute to the growth of the Malian nation. I would be derelict in my duty if I did not, at this point, lament certain absences and the arguments made for them. The current situation and events around the world, remind us each day that there is not a minute to lose when it comes to protecting our country, our people, against terrorism and the various other threats of this new century.

We are all the offspring of the same Motherland. None of us is better or worse than the others. And the respect and consideration that we owe each other means that we must know how to respect the work of the others, keeping in mind that even the most conscientious work may contain and will always contain a few flaws.

Thus, even while we remain rivals in political combat, we must never lose sight of the fact that in this land of Mali, democracy will never approach perfection until each person understands that it is everyone's responsibility to constantly contribute our ideas and talent to the work of Patriotic Perfection. It is by combining our talents and our differences that we will be able to enrich the construction of democracy on this sacred land. And one cannot hope to build a great nation by holding oneself apart, outside, each time one is not satisfied. Or, still worse, to assert that one knows how to improve the State and living conditions for the Malian people, but that to benefit from that knowledge Mali will have to wait until you are in power. No, the nation is built over the long run, and what you do will be added, little by little, to what your predecessors have done. If you can help your homeland, your people, it is here and now that you must do so.

The construction site has opened, and duty calls us all, just as we are!

The best of organizations always has flaws. The work of the greatest geniuses always includes some insufficiencies, and one does not refuse to attend an important family event because the organization is not perfect. Whether it is a baptism, an engagement, a wedding, or a death in the family, who among us would decide not to go, because the organization is not perfect? Even when you personally steer that organization, you will always see flaws, a missing detail, at the very moment that the event is underway. Because this National Conference of Understanding is a modest human work, and because it is a construction site, I thank you! Thank you, sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, thank you!

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Since 2012 Mali has gone through trials of an extent and seriousness that are certainly unequaled in our recent history. However, the difficult path was not unknown to us, for we had taken it many times. The story of our Nation since we gained our independence can be seen as a series of challenges to be taken on and overcome. We have forged all of our great achievements with effort and with solidarity. And we have learned a resiliency that many nations envy.

Today we have arrived at a stage in our history at which we must reflect on the causes of this series of crises that have plagued the North of our country and the effects of which now threaten to spread to the Center. We must also mobilize to preserve our capacity for resilience, which has been in considerable demand over the last five years. Finally, we must cooperate and come to an agreement as to the best way to revitalize our life together. These are the principal goals of the National Conference of Understanding.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As noted by the Chairman of the Conference, the organization of the National Conference of Understanding was planned for the interim period by the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation resulting from the Algiers Process. The Conference includes “equitable representation of the parties” involved in the crisis in the North of Mali, in order (and I quote): “to enable a detailed debate between the components of the Malian nation on the underlying causes of the conflict” (end of quote). At the end of its work together, the Conference must produce the elements of a Charter for Peace, Unity, and Reconciliation. The Charter will be formulated by consensus, in order to take on board the commemorative, identity, and historical dimensions of the Malian crisis. The Charter will seal Mali’s national unity and the territorial integrity, pursuant to the very terms of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. Once I have received the Conference’s recommendations, I will decide upon the framework, the procedures, and the timetable for its definitive drafting, as well as of its appropriation by all of the components of the Nation.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It seems essential to be to come back to the letter and the spirit of the Agreement to emphasize that they are both quite explicit as to the objectives set for the National Conference of Understanding. The Conference is an extremely important step in the process we have embarked on to rebuild our country. Through the great truth exercise that it promises to be, the National Conference of Understanding brings us to the door of a qualitatively new stage in the identification of our most pressing priorities,

- in the rehabilitation of our social fabric,
- and in the revitalization of the values that have enabled us until now to surmount the most difficult situations.

**Mr. Chairman of the Conference,**

In your remarks, you hoped that the participants would have both the courage to pronounce the correct diagnosis of our current situation and the audacity to propose suitable solutions. I can only echo those wishes. I will add one more, which is to see a spirit of weightiness predominate in our discussions. The current fragilities of our country are clear enough. The immensity of the efforts to be made to fully take back our destiny requires no further comment. The danger of terrorism knocks on nearly all the doors of the sub-region. In that context, we must not allow the Conference of National Understanding to be taken hostage by various forms of bids, by positioning attempts, and by challenges from the old guard.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

For my part, and based on the efforts expended in advance by the Preparatory Commission, I am deeply convinced that we will how to avoid these pitfalls. Indeed, the Chairman of the Conference, our elder Baba Akhib Haïdara, has scrupulously complied with the terms of the assignment entrusted to him. I had particularly insisted on full inclusivity, both during the preparations as well as during the Conference itself. It was also very important to me that during the discussions between participants, complete freedom of speech be respected.

These two principles were respected during the meetings that the Chairman of the Preparatory Commission of the Conference had with the signatories to the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, as well as with the representatives of the country's dynamic forces. They were also respected during the consultations organized in all of Mali's regions, in the District of Bamako, and in the refugee camps in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Niger.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The consultations enabled us to hear from the heart of the country as well as from our compatriots in distress outside the country. They permitted us to hear all of the sensibilities, all of the expectations, and—we must admit it—all of the worries and questions of the Malian people. Thanks to these meetings and contacts, the Preparatory Commission has yielded a very rich harvest of thoughts and proposals, which will surely inspire the drafters of the Charter for Peace, Unity, and Reconciliation. At a time when the entire country is on alert to save our future, I would like to share three essential points with you. All three were inspired by the report on the Conference preparations that Chairman Baba Akhib Haïdara made to the Government on March 18. All three point clearly to a positive outcome to the Conference.

First of all, the paths out of the crisis proposed by the various participants were certainly many, but the destination remains the same for all: restore our country to its heights as a nation on its feet. Next, the different approaches were phrased in the form of diverging opinions, and not in terms of irreconcilable antagonism.

Finally, there was a unanimous expression of a very strong need to improve governance in our country. Tackling this need seems to me to be indispensable for creating the base of popular confidence on which the Charter's implementation will rely.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I would like to thank Chairman Baba Akhib Haïdara and the entire team of the Preparatory Commission for the National Conference of Understanding for their investment in the task, and for the quality of the work accomplished in a relatively short period of time. I ask them to apply the same devotion and the same expertise with the participants so that the work of the Conference will fulfill the expectations of our people.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Before I conclude, I would like to emphasize that the organization of the National Conference of Understanding is guided above all by our conviction that dealing with an exceptional situation often requires an innovative approach. The exercise that we are embarking on is without precedent in our recent history, both by its nature and by its high stakes. We have sufficient advantages to succeed, as long as in conducting our work the positive trends identified during the preparatory phase are preserved. We are not looking for hypothetical panaceas. Above all, it is important for us to construct the essential compromises that will enable us to proceed confidently towards the consolidation of Peace, Unity, and Reconciliation.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As I assert once more our common determination to regain control of our future, I declare the National Conference on Understanding open.

**Long live Mali!**

**Long live the Republic!**

**Thank you."**