

First Lady Jeannette Kagame's remarks at

**The 2017 African Organisation for Research and Training in
Cancer (AORTIC) Conference**

'Cancer in Africa: Making Strides, Creating Solutions'

Kigali, 7 November 2017

**Honourable Minister of Health of Rwanda,
Honourable Ministers from visiting countries,
President of the African Organization for Research and Training
in Cancer,
Senior Representatives of Government and Civil Society
Institutions,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good Morning.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to this year's **African Organisation for Research and Training in Cancer (AORTIC) Conference**, held for the first time in Rwanda.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my warmest welcome, to those of you who are visiting Rwanda, perhaps for the first time. I hope this trip in our country will leave you with warm memories of new encounters, with people and a culture, which will make you want to visit us again.

Distinguished Delegates,

This year's conference held under the theme '**Cancer in Africa: Making Strides, Creating Solutions**' very much carries a message of hope, in the face of a disease that threatens the lives of millions across the world.

Indeed, the magnitude of this disease, was recently translated in the 2015 report by WHO (the World Health Organisation), which stated that cancer accounted for the deaths of **8.8 million people** across the globe; 70% of these deaths, occurring in low and middle income countries, many of which are in Africa.

Worse still, as our continent accounts for more than 60% of new cancer cases, it becomes more than an urgency, but rather a question of survival for us to find solutions to effectively prevent, and treat this deadly disease.

Honourable Guests,

Cancer does not discriminate. It does not discriminate against age, gender, religion, neither social status.

In Rwanda, we have also sadly witnessed how younger, and older members of our communities, have been affected by the diverse forms this disease can take.

In Rwanda, like in many other nations whose populations have access to cancer screenings, incidences of cancer diagnoses are becoming known. Men are now diagnosed with prostate cancer; and children are faced with the overwhelming burden to fight leukaemia and kidney cancer, even at a tender age.

As for women, breast and cervical cancers are the top two cancers currently hurting our mothers and sisters.

While it is encouraging to know that years of research have demonstrated that approximately **one third of cancer cases can be prevented**, we, as concerned global citizens, now have the duty to put in place more effective, and sustainable systems of prevention.

As our experience teaches us that cancer can be caused by a variety of factors, other than a specific genetic makeup, we also have to continue to carefully assess those other causes that are environmental, and influenced by our lifestyles. This assessment would help us teach each other, how to prevent those different forms of cancers, that have increased through the years.

Indeed, too many lives are still lost due to the lack of early and regular screenings, along with the lack of effective knowledge dissemination on what we should do, to greatly reduce our chances of developing cancer.

Distinguished Delegates,

It is in line with that reasoning that we applied our knowledge regarding the prevention of cervical cancer, through immunisation against HPV (the Human Papilloma Virus). Thus, in 2011, the Rwandan Government, with the support of schools, and the community at large, conducted a nationwide campaign, to advocate for, and provide HPV vaccinations for young girls.

This campaign helped achieve a 95% coverage of HPV vaccinations, of the targeted population of young girls aged 12, and through it, will help contribute to the protection of their reproductive health.

This is an example of the kind of success that can be achieved, when all stakeholders respond to the call to come together, to deliver sustainable solutions, to a global public health concern.

Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,

Establishing strong and meaningful partnerships is undeniably important in our quest to fight this disease.

In 2011, a partnership between the Government of Rwanda, and various stakeholders, helped bring to life the Butaro Hospital and its Cancer Centre of Excellence, which officially opened in 2012, in the

northern province. With this Cancer Centre came a new opportunity to have a better chance at beating cancer, for thousands of individuals from Rwanda, and beyond.

With its three wards, dedicated to children, women and men, Butaro Hospital is able to screen, diagnose, provide patient follow-up, and palliative care.

Offering surgery and chemotherapy, they have managed to treat up to 6,000 cancer sufferers to date, and joined other general hospitals fighting cancer throughout the country, by conducting more than 1,000 tests per year.

Distinguished Audience,

Although the world's specialists, oncologists and researchers are yet to find a singular cure for the various types of cancers, we, as a continent, can ease the pressure, by further raising public awareness, and developing preventative programmes that can be understood, and accessed by all.

The fight against cancer diseases calls for an increase and diversity of partnerships, and collaborations within different sectors, institutions and organisations.

It begins with the advocacy and mobilising public-private support for this cause. It also requires strengthening along the cancer care continuum: raising awareness, educating, conducting prevention interventions, having structures for early diagnosis, and improving access to care and treatment.

Indeed, we will have more chances to win the fight against cancer if we also promote the need for well-trained, skilled and dedicated workforce. One that strives to conduct impactful research, treats with compassion and care, and finds solutions customized to our population's needs.

This fight against cancer also forces us to take an honest look on what is still needed:

Are we doing everything we can to promote scientific research on our continent?

Are we creating the structures needed to encourage a rise of new, and young African scientists, who will be drawn to this specific field?

Are we effectively building capacity in our countries, to help our scientists become solution-driven, in the face of key health challenges?

Are we creating the right incentives, or environment, that encourage research, that assesses all ways through which we can prevent cancer?

AORTIC has already shown progress towards prioritising oncology training for health workers and research on cancer prevalence, both of which are well stipulated in the mandate of the organisation. It is now upon us to devise strategies to capitalize on the progress made, by incorporating it within our different existing structures, and if needed, by establishing new ones, able to implement what is required for the holistic wellbeing of our communities.

Esteemed Guests,

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to once more thank the AORTIC organising committee for having this very important conference in our homeland.

As a nation striving to achieve sustainable development, and improve the quality of life in all our communities, we understand that the health of our citizens, and that of future generations, is a non-negotiable priority.

Our aim is to ensure that the fight against cancer continues positively ahead, as it will be done through the finalisation of a radiotherapy centre at the Rwanda Military Hospital. Beginning next year, this

radiotherapy centre, will provide cancer patients with a final, integral link within comprehensive cancer care and treatment, through radiotherapy services.

As we remember that beyond the statistics and treatment trials, we are dealing with a mother, a father, a sibling, or a child, whose life will never again be the same after their diagnosis, we must pledge to never stop educating our populations about the importance of living healthy lifestyles, which include regular medical check-ups so our health systems, can help our communities before it is too late.

Let us also keep in mind that this fight is not ours alone.

I humbly believe our continent needs more networks of African experts, working together to promote and facilitate research and evaluation in Africa, through capacity-building, regional and international collaboration.

Indeed, we can share and use each other's expertise,

- by learning how to incorporate in our national strategic planning, policies behind successful practices conducted across borders;
- by increasing awareness of our regional stakeholders in support of research and development;

- by increasing our number of regulated bodies consulting on key ethical issues.
- And ultimately, by aiming for a greater integration of the African cancer research community, into the global strategy for research and development.

Together, we can win this fight against cancer, one life at a time.

I thank you for your kind attention and now declare the 2017 AORTIC Conference open!