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'Africa's interest paramount'



BRUSSELS- President Dr Mokgweetsi Masisi (right) during an interview with BBC Africa's Mr Peter Okwoche (centre) on the sidelines of the 6th European Union-African Union summit in Belgium on Thursday. President Masisi talked about Africa's drive to produce own vaccines for its 1.3 billion people as well as to supply the rest of the world. Photo: Godfrey Mpuse

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Botswana, Flanders explore cooperation

BRUSSELS - President Dr Mokgweetsi Masisi says as a developing economy, Botswana needs all the support it can get from developed countries in the form of human capital development, trade cooperation, exchange of knowledge as well as research and development collaboration.

The President said this during a meeting with the Minister President of the Government of Flanders region in Belgium, Mr. Jam Jambon recently.

President Masisi expressed Botswana's desire to cooperate with the Flanders region in areas of innovation which he said was demonstrated by the inclusion of University of Botswana (UB), Botswana University of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (BUAN) and Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST) vice chancellors in his delegation during last year's visit.

The trio identified three main opportunities for collaboration with the University of Leuven in the space of business development and incubation, post graduate education and training and research and collaboration.

KULeuven is a leading institution for research and education in Europe and Botswana considers it a model in many areas such as establishment of tech ecosystems, innovation hubs, research product commercialisation, intellectual property protection and incorporating entrepreneurship skills in the education curriculum.

All these areas were in line with the President's roadmap, Dr Masisi said.

They also identified opportunities with the Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, an organization working on the agriculture sustainability, fisheries and agri-food sector.

In addition, the institution provides great opportunities for BIUST such as collaborations on drone technology in precision agriculture, food processing innovation technologies and food quality assurance.

The Flanders region institutions have expressed a desire to collaborate with the three universities to offer them technical assistance and expertise in the areas mentioned. They are expected to sign MOUs sometime soon. President Masisi also appealed to Minister President Jambon to support Botswana's economy through buying its beef as well as encouraging Flanders big businesses to consider Botswana as their investment destination.

He said Botswana and Flanders should also explore areas of cooperation in the diamond space as they both produce and trade in diamonds.

Another item on the two leader's agenda was the hosting of the Kimberly Process secretariat.

President Masisi is using every opportunity at the summit to meet EU leaders canvassing for hosting of the secretariat by Botswana.

His argument is that being the

biggest producer of diamonds by value, boasting an admirable record of ethical mining of the gem and pursuing a policy of diamonds for development, it was befitting for Botswana to host the secretariat.

Austria and China are Botswana's competitors in the Kimberly Process secretariat bid.

For his part, Minister President Jambon commended Botswana's for its good governance, democracy and adherence to the rule of law record which he said created a favourable environment for the two countries to work together.

He also informed President Masisi that his government had taken keen interest in the LEGABIBO case, the Court of Appeal judgment, government's acceptance of the verdict and President Masisi's public commitment to ensure its implementation.

Mr Jambon described government's position as a step in the right direction that would strengthen Botswana's standing on human rights issues.

In response, President Masisi reiterated his government's commitment to respect the judgment as well as to protect the rights of people in same sex relationships.

He said his government decided to appeal the High Court judgment so that the matter may be decided by the highest court in the land thus putting it to finality.

Now that the Court of Appeal

had made a decision, everyone was compelled to respect its decision and the matter must be put to rest, the President said.

He however acknowledged the

controversy surrounding the issue adding that Botswana was a very conservative society and it would take time for many people to accept people in same sex relationships.

Dr Masisi said it was government's responsibility to help society accept change hence his full commitment to protecting the rights of same sex couples. **BOPA**



BRUSSELS- Austria chancellor, Mr Karl Nehammer (left) and President Masisi during bilateral talks on the sidelines of the 6th AU-EU summit in Belgium recently. They discussed Botswana and Austria's bid to host the Kimberly Process secretariat and also explored areas of cooperation and compromise. Photo: Godfrey Mpuse

'Africa's interest is paramount'

GABORONE - There is no need for sparring by any of the big economic world players in the European Union, the US and China over Africa. Nor is there call for anxiety as Africa has had long and fruitful relations with these subcontinents. The underlying principle should, and will always be, Africa's interest first.

This is what comes out clearly at the tail end of President Mokgweetsi Masisi's interview with the BBC Africa's Peter Okwoche on the sidelines of the 6th European Union-African Union summit in Brussels, Belgium that ended Thursday.

In the interview President Masisi talks about Africa's drive to produce own vaccines for its 1.3 billion people as well as supply the rest of the world, but that a lot of work still lies ahead...

Masisi: There's a lot more that needs to be done...we need to invest more in the value chain of vaccines and that involves R&D, a lot of research goes into it to create the patents' intellectual capital and the underlying foundational capacity to produce knowledge needs to be developed; the whole ecosystem of legal frameworks that protect these intellectual properties, not only on the African continent but globally for why couldn't we fathom that

one day... not in the too distant future we could actually have a patent coming from Africa that 's solely sought after? That we see happening from Africa, that which is happening now from Europe, with this supply and capacity in Africa and there is demand and need in the rest of the world? It is just beginning because with the biggest common free trade area in the world - in Africa - through the AfCFTA - 1.3 billion and growing...we're the youngest continent, the magic is happening in Africa, and so more of this needs to be done; That's why in Botswana, even though we're not among the six, we've developed our own interest in vaccine development. We're developing our own ecosystem, we will cluster around these and grow to the best of our capacity to develop other vaccines using the latest technology

BBC: Covid has been a shock to the system for the world, but more so for African countries especially given the dearth of vaccines on the continent now. This is more like a wake-up call for the continent, now. In your dealings with other heads of state are you beginning to see a commitment, for instance to fund the research that you're talking about to fund the manufacture of vaccines that you're talking about?

Masisi: I'm seeing a deep desire. I'm seeing a deep commitment, resolve, particularly among African leaders, Botswana included. We have a burning desire to use first and foremost our own resources because yes, it's been a shock, but I hazard to say it will not be the last shock. Other pandemics will come, other variants will come, we must be better prepared

BBC: A lot of people have described it as a summit that is needed to reboot the relationship between Africa and Europe, is that the way the African heads of states are seeing this as well?

Masisi: I think on the main they are and they're very grateful for that. You must remember that the EU has been very generous, it's been the biggest contributor of vaccines to Africa - more than any other part of the world, they've contributed very generously and to a large extent they've also...

BBC: But they have not contributed enough! that's the thing... you know they've...

Masisi: They've contributed more than anybody else but they...

BBC: But they haven't hit their targets **Masisi:** No, no no! Nobody has, but they've done the most and that should be acknowledged and we're grateful for it. And we're urging them to do more, and they're willing to do more,

and part of doing more was to transfer technology; part of doing more was to reach a compromise that we agreed to today, which is a stellar, and a breakthrough for the summit. It is therefore I conclude that this summit has been a huge success because we agreed to compromise on those who wanted not to release the copyright protection and those who demanded that it be released.

BBC: A lot of people say that Europe actually needed this summit because it's uncomfortable with the speed at which Africa is gravitating towards China... what's your view on that..

Masisi: Well, I leave it to those... others who'd spectate and express their view. I'm a pragmatist acting on the ground. We have a long history of relations with Europe, we have a long history of relations with China, we have a long history of relations with the US. We will manage our relations with whoever and the guiding principle will be our interest, Africa's interest, that's what comes first **BBC:** Has this summit been a success?

Masisi: The summit has been a success, I pronounced it so. Botswana is expected to continue discussions on manufacture of vaccines behind the scenes, to be able eventually o manufacture a cocktail of vaccines. **BOPA**

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