WELCOMING SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE SPEAKER OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, THE HON. FRANCIS K. X. OLE KAPARO, EGH, MP, TO THE DELEGATES ATTENDING THE CONFERENCE ON PARLIAMENTS' INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ICTs TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY AND PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNANCE, AT SAFARI PARK HOTEL

Hon. Members of Parliament,

Representatives of Development Partners,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Kenya National Assembly and on my own behalf, I wish to welcome you all to this very important Conference on Parliaments' Information Management Systems in Africa. I am especially grateful for your attendance because I sent the invitations in December last year. That is the time when many of us are preoccupied with planning how they intend to spend their Christmas vacations, which normally extends into the new year. Some Parliaments represented here also terminate their Sessions around Christmas.

That you have set other commitments aside in order to afford some time to come to Nairobi for this Conference is a great honour to Kenya and we do not take it for granted. Please feel at home and make Nairobi your home away from home for the time you will be here for the Conference.

Hon. Colleagues and Distinguished Delegates,

Let me share with you some few thoughts about this Conference. In doing so, I hope it would not be immodest for me to thank the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies who, unfortunately, is not here with us. It is him who first thought about how the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Italian Government could assist a number of African Parliaments to acquire and install ICT facilities in order to serve their Members and people better.

In our Parliament, we had discussed such a facility with a number of development partners on several occasions, with no success.

In September, 2003, I led a delegation on a one week's tour of the Chamber of Deputies in Rome at the invitation of Mr. President. Members of that delegation to this day have fond memories of Rome in general and the Chamber of Deputies in particular. They were taken round Parliament Buildings to see for themselves how the development of the ICTs had taken place over a period of 30 years, quite an impressive history.

After the delegation's return, we embarked on the user requirement analysis with a lot of enthusiasm. This phase is now complete. The Parliamentary Service Commission has already authorized the installation of a network. This will facilitate connectivity of all computers at the Parliament Buildings to enable each Member have their e-mail address and access the Internet with ease cost-effectively.

Hon. Colleagues,

It is unequivocally clear that anybody who works in Parliament and is not computer literate will be faced with several operational problems. In preparation for these changes, the Parliamentary Service Commission in the current financial year doubled the allocation for training in our Vote. That way we shall be able to train all Members to be computer literate within the shortest time possible.

Needless to say, this Conference is very important for us because it has been held at a time that we are managing fundamental changes in our National Assembly that are going to alter our operations significantly. We intend to take Parliament to the people by using ICTs to ensure that each Member of Parliament is capable of delivering services to his constituents and conversely, the people are able to reach their Members instantly when they need to do so. Through the ICTs, we also hope to dymistify Parliament so that it becomes a resource centre for disseminating information on the activities in Parliament to those who might be interested in such information. I believe that is a basic desire of any representative Parliament.

The other point I wish to make is that for too long, African Parliaments have acted as stand alone institutions without any reference to what is happening in their neighbourhoods. Indeed, sometimes we tend to have more contacts with overseas Parliaments than the Parliaments within our own regions. This is wrong. Our Parliaments are young and I would like to imagine that in their youthfulness, they may need to learn a lot more from each other as institutions in the same age bracket than trying to do so from our friends

who have been around for centuries. The age-group concept is a very powerful social force in African societies.

Hon. Colleagues,

One reason why I am personally excited about this project is that it is going to make the first step towards enabling African Parliaments share institutional information with each other in real time. Strengthening democracy and Parliamentary governance cannot be achieved easily if it is an ideal not shared by counties in a region. We live in a globalised world such that events in one country particularly in one region are likely to spill over and affect other counties in the same region. We therefore need to act in unison in strengthening our Parliamentary institutions to improve governance in all our countries in the African Region.

Having seen the list of presenters in this Conference and their CVs, it is only fair and polite for me not to broach the theme of the Conference apart from informing you what the Kenya National Assembly has so far achieved in the development of ICTs. These experts are best placed to talk to you about the ICTs capabilities in strengthening democracy and Parliamentary governance.

May I once again welcome you all to this very important Conference and wish you a fruitful stay in Kenya.

Thank you.

The Hon. K.F.X. ole Kaparo, MP
Speaker
The Speaker's Chambers
Parliament Buildings
NAIROBI

10th February, 2005