Good Morning and a very warm welcome to you all in Mauritius.

I wish to extend a special welcome to those of you who have travelled to our country for the first time.

I am sure you will take time away from your busy schedule to visit some of the exotic places in our island as well as enjoy the hospitality of our people.

I am informed that this is the second time that Mauritius has been chosen as the venue for the Plenary Assembly Session of the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

Mauritius had the privilege to host the second Bi-Annual Plenary Assembly Session of the SADC Parliamentary Forum in November 2002 under the theme, “The Role of Parliaments in Poverty Reduction”, following which a plan of action for the period 2005-2010 was prepared to fight poverty in the Member States.

Unfortunately, a review of the plan showed that poverty had in fact increased in the Member States.

Therefore, we feel deeply honoured to host you again on the occasion of this 35th Plenary Assembly Session.

I note that this year, the main theme of your meeting is – “SADC Regional Parliament – The Future is Now”

This theme, in my view, is very pertinent.
Because after 15 years since its creation in 1997, it is timely and appropriate that as Parliamentarians, you look back at the road already travelled, but more importantly, you reflect on what the future will be.

Not only is the 35th Plenary Assembly Session deliberating an important question, namely the call for a SADC Regional Parliament, but you will for the first time since the establishment of the SADC Parliamentary Forum also debate as to whether you should “operate like a Parliament”.

I understand that if ever you agree to operate like a Parliament, you will adopt all the Parliamentary procedures, systems and practices, but you will remain a deliberative institution, that is, the Forum of Parliamentarians and not the substance of it.

I encourage this great step that the SADC Parliamentary Forum is envisaging as it is in line with your desire to be transformed into a SADC Regional Parliament.

This proactive step is also complemented by the benchmarks for democratic legislatures you have already adopted.

I am also informed that as part of its initiative to draw Parliamentarians closer to the implementation of the SADC Common agenda, and accelerate regional integration, the SADC Parliamentary Forum has aligned its Parliamentary Committees and Programs sector wise.

As you know, the complexity of regional integration requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders and multifaceted approaches.

Therefore, the quest for a SADC Parliament should be discussed within the broader context of Community’s desire for deeper regional integration.

According to the Revised Treaty of SADC, we are committed to “promote sustainable and equitable economic growth and socio-economic development through efficient productive systems, deeper cooperation and integration, good governance and durable peace and security, so that the region emerges as a competitive and effective player in international relations and the world economy.”

Article 5 of the Treaty articulates the SADC Common Agenda which commits SADC Member States to policies and strategies aimed at realizing the overall vision and mission of SADC.

Through the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan of SADC, the Region has already outlined an integration Road Map which is the establishment of a Free Trade Area by 2008, Customs Union by 2010, Common Market by 2015, Monetary Union by 2016, and ultimately an Economic Union with a Single Currency by 2018.

With the postponement of the Free Trade Area (FTA) earmarked to start in 2008 and the Customs Union which was scheduled for 2010, it is imperative that you revisit the ambitious regional integration Road Map you have set for yourselves and propose new realistic timelines.
Because without regional integration, it will be difficult to integrate the world economy.

I also encourage the ongoing review of the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP).

I trust that it will earnestly do an introspection of what works and what does not work with regard to the SADC regional integration agenda.

Amongst the key challenges to SADC and African integration in general is the issue of state sovereignty and multiple memberships to various regional economic schemes as well as the fragmentation of regional groupings in the Continent.

I do remember that at some point in time, discussions had started on the need to consolidate the regional groupings so as to avoid multiple membership and wastage of resources and effort.

I would like to believe that for deeper regional integration to be realized, state parties need to agree to be more proactive and committed to their objectives.

And, deeper regional integration requires the consolidation of regional economic blocks in the wider interests of our people.

In this regard, the wisdom and participation of the Parliamentarians is also a *sine qua non* condition.

This is underpinned by the fact that the establishment of a customs union with a defined external tariff is only possible when all the member states belong to the agreed regional economic community.

Until the SADC Regional Parliament is established, the role and participation of Parliamentarians in the SADC integration agenda can for now only be harnessed through your participation at the national level.

*Distinguished Parliamentarians*

If we are to reap the benefits of representative democracy, it is important that we pause to appreciate the importance and indispensability of the institution of Parliament at all levels of governance.

Parliaments, through the elected representatives become the transmittal belt of community interest and this is a constitutional mandate which cannot be usurped by any other institutions.

Globalization has resulted in the regionalization of the policy arena as domestic policy is more often than not, dictated by policies and decisions made at international and regional platforms.

National governments are then expected to ratify, domesticate and implement the international and regional treaties and protocols.

This has led to what is rightly termed as the “democratic deficit” at the regional and international levels.
The deficit relates to the fact that the people elect their representatives to primarily represent them at the national and local level but increasingly, decisions which they have to comply with are made at regional and international levels.

We all know that Members of our Parliaments are not always present at these foras.

However, they are required to translate such decisions into law and exercise oversight over the implementation of international and regional instruments at the national level.

Europe and some other regions bridged this democratic deficit by establishing the European Parliament (EP) which is an equally important player in the integration of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Distinguished Parliamentarians

On 08 September 1997, the SADC Summit of Heads of State or Government approved the establishment of the SADC Parliamentary Forum as a regional parliamentary deliberative platform.

The Summit indeed established the SADC Parliamentary Forum as a Parliamentary Consultative Assembly with the ultimate goal of transforming the Forum into a SADC Regional Parliament.

The Forum is still a deliberative Forum.

A SADC Regional Parliament is yet to be established.

I am however, pleased to note that the SADC Parliamentary Forum has been true to its constitutive mandate, namely, that of being a worthy regional parliamentary consultative platform.

In this regard, I encourage you to continue to be the voice of all the “SADC Parliamentarians”, as you rightly profess.

Had it not been for the Forum, Parliamentarians would not have had the opportunity to share knowledge and experience as well as build consensus on matters of mutual concern among the Member States.

The SADC Parliamentary Forum, remains to my mind a valuable stakeholder in the overall integration process.

I am further pleased to note that the Forum, since its establishment in 1997, has made a number of important contributions to the advancement of the SADC integration agenda.

The Forum, through the Norms and Standards for Democratic Elections which were the first regional instruments to set standards and principles for the conduct and management of elections on the African continent, raised the bar on what should be the normative standards for free, fair and credible elections.
Using the now refined Benchmarks for Democratic Elections in SADC, our Parliamentarians continue to observe Elections in the SADC Region including the recent Presidential and National elections in the Republic of Malawi which were led by Honorable PEEROO, Speaker of the National Assembly of Mauritius, and current President of the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

This year, as you may know, is the year of Elections in many SADC countries.

Five SADC member states will conduct their national elections in 2014.

Here, may I request this august gathering to join me in congratulating the people of South Africa and Malawi for the very peaceful and credible manner in which they conducted their elections recently.

If anything, they have demonstrated to the international community that democracy based on free and fair elections is on the march in Africa for more than a decade.

Not only free and fair elections but the Continent is on the march for social and economic development as well.

SADC has no doubt made strides in advancing representative democracy in conformity with regional and international best practices as embedded in the various regional, continental and international Election Instruments.

In August 2004, it was in Grand Bay that the need to transform the SADC Parliamentary Forum into a SADC Regional Parliament was formally discussed by the SADC Summit of Heads of State and Government.

The SADC Leadership, after deliberation, decided not to recommend the establishment of a SADC Regional Parliament but the continuation of the activities of the SADC Parliamentary Forum as it is.

The Leaders of SADC noted that there were a number of important issues and questions that had to be clarified.

Therefore, as you proceed to deliberate on the theme of this 35th Plenary Assembly Session, it is important, bearing in mind the Summit’s decision in 2004 that you consider some pertinent issues regarding a SADC Parliament.

These include:

(a) the specific role and functions of the Regional Parliament vis-à-vis the National Parliaments;

(b) the relationship between the proposed SADC Parliament and the National Parliaments and how the sovereignty will be preserved;

(c) the relationship between Regional Parliament and the Pan African Parliament (PAP) as well as other regional parliamentary assemblies;

(d) the interactive framework between the SADC Regional Parliament, the SADC and other organs and institutions of the Community; and
more importantly, the additional costs needed for the operation of
the SADC Regional Parliament and the implications for Member
States, especially at a time when scarce resources have become the
prime concern of all governments.

This 35th Plenary Assembly Session is therefore a platform to provide clarity on
“the Case of a SADC Parliament”.

I would like to underscore that for regional integration to work and yield the
desired results, the process should be above all, people-centered and should
also be owned by the people themselves.

As it has rightly been argued, the establishment of a SADC Regional Parliament
will be instrumental in popularizing the SADC Treaty as well as the SADC
Common agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The ideal of a SADC Regional Parliament is indeed a plausible one, but as a
Region, we want also to ensure that the pertinent questions and issues
regarding the proposed Parliament are fully addressed in a comprehensive,
reasonable and practical manner.

Such issues should be your major pre-occupation during this 35th Forum and
should guide the process of your deliberations.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the SADC Parliamentary Forum for having
chosen my good friend, the Hon. Abdool Razack Mohamed PEEROO, the
Speaker of the National Assembly of Mauritius as the President of the SADC
Parliamentary Forum.

This is, indeed, an honour bestowed upon the Republic of Mauritius and its
people.

With these words, it is now my pleasure to declare open this 35th Plenary
Assembly Session of the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

I wish you all fruitful deliberations.

I thank you for your attention.