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Speech delivered by the South African Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen as Chairperson of the Joint Committee of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Ministers of Agriculture and Food Security, Fisheries and Aquaculture at the ministerial session held in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe on 29 May 2026.

Honourable Dr Anxious Jongwe Masuka, Minister of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development of the Republic of Zimbabwe;

Honourable Ministers;

Ms Angèle Makombo N'Tumba, SADC Deputy Executive Secretary for Regional Integration;

Senior Officials;

Distinguished Delegates;

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

It is a privilege to join you here in Victoria Falls for this important meeting of SADC Ministers responsible for Agriculture and Food Security, Fisheries and Aquaculture.

Allow me at the outset to express my sincere appreciation to the Government and people of Zimbabwe for their warm hospitality and excellent arrangements. Victoria Falls stands as a symbol of the strength, resilience and shared heritage of our region and it is fitting that we gather here at a time when regional cooperation has never been more important.

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I also wish to thank the SADC Secretariat and our Senior Officials for the extensive work undertaken in preparation for this meeting. The recommendations emerging from the technical sessions will be critical in shaping the decisions we take as Ministers over the coming days.

Colleagues,

The issues before us go to the heart of the daily lives of our people. Food security, agricultural production, animal health, fisheries and rural livelihoods are not abstract policy discussions. They determine whether families can afford food, whether farmers can remain productive, whether young people can find economic opportunity, and whether our region can withstand an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Our meeting takes place during a period of considerable geopolitical and economic volatility. Across the world we are seeing disruptions to supply chains, rising input costs - particularly fertiliser prices - inflationary pressures, and growing competition over strategic resources. These global shocks are increasingly intersecting with climate-related disasters, droughts, floods and disease outbreaks in ways that directly affect African agriculture and food systems.

For Southern Africa, these pressures are not theoretical. They are already being felt by farmers, consumers and governments across our region.

While the latest regional assessments indicate some improvement in cereal production and food security conditions compared to the severe drought impacts of the previous season, an estimated 58 million people across SADC Member States still face acute food insecurity due to issues around access and affordability. This reality demands urgency from all of us.

Colleagues, one area where I believe we can no longer afford delay is the Harmonisation of the Fertiliser Regulatory Framework across SADC. The repeated global shocks of recent years, from COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict to the current instability affecting Middle Eastern supply routes, have exposed just how

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vulnerable our region remains to fertiliser supply disruptions and price volatility. We cannot continue entering each planting season fragmented by unharmonised standards, duplicative registration systems and regulatory bottlenecks that unnecessarily increase costs for farmers and slow regional trade. The proposed Memorandum of Understanding on the Harmonisation of Fertiliser Regulatory Frameworks is urgently needed and, in South Africa's view, should be fast-tracked well before 2027. This is not simply a technical regulatory exercise. It is a food security imperative, a productivity imperative and increasingly a strategic resilience imperative for the entire region. A harmonised regional framework would strengthen investment certainty, improve fertiliser availability and affordability, support regional production capacity, and help protect smallholder and commercial farmers alike from future external shocks.

It also reminds us that food security cannot be separated from resilience. We must build food systems that are adaptive, inclusive, sustainable and regionally coordinated. Under South Africa's G20 Presidency, we advanced the principle of Ubuntu approaches to food security: the understanding that our collective resilience depends on the resilience of our neighbours. As the G20 Food Security Task Force emphasised, no country can sustainably secure its food systems in isolation from the broader region and global system.

Colleagues, this conversation must also revitalise how we think about the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme and the broader transformation of African agriculture. CAADP was never intended to become merely a reporting framework or a biennial scorecard exercise. Its original purpose was to drive real structural transformation in African agriculture through investment, trade integration, productivity growth, resilience and inclusion. The transition toward the Kampala Declaration gives us an opportunity to restore that sense of urgency and ambition. For SADC, this means moving beyond fragmented implementation towards practical regional delivery: expanding intra-African agricultural trade, unlocking blended finance, modernising SPS systems, strengthening irrigation and climate resilience, integrating smallholders into value chains, and creating meaningful

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opportunities for young people and women across the agricultural economy. If we are serious about food security and economic growth in Southern Africa, then agricultural transformation cannot remain an aspiration. It must become a measurable regional growth strategy rooted in execution, competitiveness and regional cooperation.

That principle is especially relevant to the challenge currently confronting our region: Foot and Mouth Disease.

The scale of the current FMD outbreaks across Southern Africa should concern every one of us. Eleven SADC Member States have reported outbreaks, with severe consequences for livestock production, rural livelihoods, trade and regional food systems.

For many families across our region, livestock are not simply commercial assets. They are stores of wealth, sources of nutrition, draft power, school fees and household survival. When animal disease spreads unchecked, the impact reaches far beyond the farm gate. It affects food affordability, market access, export earnings and economic stability across the entire region.

South Africa has learnt through painful experience that FMD cannot be managed through fragmented national responses alone. Animal diseases do not respect borders. A weakness in one part of the region quickly becomes a vulnerability for all of us.

That is why South Africa strongly welcomes the decision by SADC Ministers and the Livestock Technical Committee to prioritise the development of a Regional Coordination Framework for FMD control.

This regional framework must move us beyond reactive crisis management toward a more coordinated, risk-based and preventative regional system. It must strengthen

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surveillance, improve information sharing, harmonise movement controls, support traceability systems, enhance laboratory and diagnostic cooperation, and improve coordinated vaccination capacity across borders.

Importantly, this regional approach should increasingly be guided through a stronger One Health framework that recognises the interconnected nature of animal health, human health, food systems, ecosystems and regional economic stability. As SADC moves toward a more integrated disease management architecture, we should actively explore progressive buffer zoning, compartmentalisation models and coordinated regional biosecurity corridors that allow us to better contain outbreaks while protecting trade flows and agricultural production systems. These approaches have become increasingly important globally because they move us away from blunt, economy-wide shutdown responses toward more risk-based and science-driven management systems. In a region where livestock mobility, wildlife interfaces and cross-border trade are deeply interconnected, stronger regional coordination through a One Health lens is no longer optional. It is becoming essential to safeguarding food security, protecting livelihoods, maintaining market confidence and strengthening long-term regional resilience.

Importantly, it must also be practical and implementable.

One of the recommendations currently under consideration is the establishment of a SADC Regional FMD Vaccine Bank. The principle behind such a mechanism is straightforward: preparedness is always less costly than prolonged outbreaks and delayed responses.

International experience from regions that have successfully managed FMD demonstrates that regional cooperation, coordinated vaccine access and rapid deployment capacity are essential components of long-term disease control.

Of course, discussions around governance arrangements, financing models, technical partnerships and implementation modalities must still be carefully considered by Member States and informed by the recommendations emerging from the technical

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engagements currently underway. But I believe there is growing consensus that the status quo is not sustainable.

Colleagues,

As we deliberate, we should also recognise that animal health, market access and food security are deeply interconnected.

A region that cannot effectively manage transboundary animal disease risks will struggle to unlock the full value of its livestock economy, expand exports, attract investment and create jobs across agricultural value chains.

Equally, a region that invests in stronger veterinary systems, regional surveillance, coordinated SPS measures and modernised agricultural systems positions itself to compete more effectively in global markets while protecting food affordability and rural livelihoods at home.

This is why the discussions before us matter so much.

We have an opportunity not only to respond to an immediate crisis, but to strengthen the long-term resilience and competitiveness of agriculture in Southern Africa.

South Africa remains committed to working constructively with all Member States, the SADC Secretariat, regional institutions, the private sector and international partners to advance practical regional solutions that support food security, disease control and agricultural growth.

Programme Director,

With those remarks, I wish the Ministerial Session fruitful deliberations, and I look forward to the decisions and outcomes that will emerge from our engagements today.

I thank you.

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