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**TOGETHER TOWARDS
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In English

Dr. Lee White, Minister of Forest, Gabon

**MINISTRY OF FOREST, SEAS, THE ENVIRONMENT IN CHARGE OF CLIMATE AND LAND USE PLAN
GABON
HONORARY MINISTER LEE WHITE SPEECH**

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished guests,

It is a real pleasure for me to be able to attend this important meeting here in Shanghai. Allow me to thank the Ministry of Forestry and Grasslands of the People's Republic of China, the people of Shanghai and the conference organisers, both for their kind invitation and, particularly, for the warm welcome we have received since our arrival.

I believe that this meeting will be remembered as a watershed, where producers and consumers of tropical timber came together to discuss a new vision for tropical forests. A vision in which responsible, law abiding companies guarantee the survival of tropical forests by committing to sustainably harvest tropical timber, in well-organized concessions that maintain the ecosystem services that forests provide to our forest dwelling people, our nations and to our planet.

In my country, Gabon, commercial forestry began in 1889, when the first Okoumé logs were sent to Hamburg in Germany. In 1992, just over a century later, President Omar Bongo stated at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 that I quote, “all too often, African countries have felt obliged to develop at no matter what the cost”. He was referring to the environmental cost of badly planned development in a continent trying to catch up with the rest of the world. Since then, Gabon has taken a series of actions to craft a new development model that will preserve natural capital, yet still allow us to develop our country.

The first big step was the adoption by the Gabonese Parliament in 2001 of a modern forestry law that makes sustainable management of forests compulsory. Then, in 2002, President Omar Bongo announced the creation of 13 National Parks, covering 11% of Gabon’s terrestrial ecosystems.

However, when President Ali Bongo Ondimba was elected in 2009, just 15% of Gabon’s timber was being processed within our territory, even though by then the forestry law required this figure to be 60%. Gabon was still stuck in the traditional African economic model, providing under-valued, un-processed natural materials to feed development outside the continent.

He took decisive action. He banned the export of un-processed timber and created a special economic zone outside Libreville, where fiscal incentives made investment in timber processing attractive. He also adopted a national climate plan and then a sustainable development law and a national land-use plan, to ensure that Gabon’s forests would continue to play their critical role as a carbon store and sink, vital in the planetary fight against climate change; whilst also making a proportionate contribution to our economy.

As a result of these policy decisions, we have maintained our forest cover at 88%, our deforestation rate below 0.01% and have set aside 21% of our territory as terrestrial protected areas.

When a spike in illegal forestry, fueled by corruption, was detected in 2017, President Bongo took a further decision: to make FSC certification obligatory for all forestry operations by 2022.

My job, 130 years after Gabon’s first exports of logs, is to ensure that we lay the foundations for a sustainable industry that will still be producing precious tropical hardwoods in 2150, thereby maintaining the forests and their ecosystem services and developing our forest economy.

We plan to continue to develop in-country transformation of timber harvested sustainably from our natural forests; but expect also to establish plantation forests that will produce 4 - 5 times more volume. In so doing, we expect to multiply our timber-based economy 10-fold and to add over 50,000 forest-sector jobs. Our timber will be 100% certified and we expect to develop methodologies to ensure that Gabon’s timber products are legal, climate friendly, positive for biodiversity and beneficial to forest dwelling communities, as well as to the nation and the planet as a whole.

I am here to pass the message that this is the right time to invest in Gabon’s forestry sector if you share our vision and our values. I believe Gabon has unique potential to supply tropical timber that will enable us collectively to respond to the challenges of the sustainable development goals, to fight climate change and to preserve biodiversity.

If you share these ambitions I would like to talk to you!

Thank you.