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The laying of the first stone of the future Moroccan high speed line in the presence of His Majesty King Mohammed VI and President Sarkozy symbolises an important step towards high speed rail in Africa

(Tangier/Paris, 29 September 2011). Today, the first stone of the high speed line which will connect Tangier, Rabat and Casablanca in Morocco is being laid in Tangier in the presence of His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco, Nicolas Sarkozy, President of France, His Royal Highness Prince Megrin Ben Abdulaziz Al Saud representing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mr Karim Ghellab, Minister for Equipment and Transport in Morocco, Mr Thierry Mariani, French Transport Minister, Mr Mohammed Rabie Khlie, Director General of the Moroccan Railways ONCF and Chairman of the Africa Region of the International Union of Railways (UIC), Mr Guillaume Pepy, Chief Executive of SNCF and Jean-Pierre Loubinoux, Director General of the International Union of Railways (UIC).

This symbolic act signals the launch of construction work for the 200-kilometre high speed line connecting the main economic hubs of the country, Tangier and Casablanca, and running through Rabat, the administrative capital of the kingdom.

Once the line has been fully completed, journey times between Tangier and Casablanca should be reduced from 5h45 at present to 2h10 in 2015. The high speed services will boost traffic volumes, set to increase to 6 million passengers once the line enters into service.

The launch of construction work for a Moroccan high speed line represents the starting point for the development of high speed rail on the African continent, building on the success of high speed projects in Japan and elsewhere in Asia, Europe, Russia, the United States and more recently the Middle East, with a high speed line in Turkey.

Jean-Pierre Loubinoux, Director General of UIC, welcomes this event *“which is hugely important as the connection will not only be the first high speed line on the African continent, but also constitute the first link in a network developing southwards. High speed rail in conjunction with a well-developed conventional network will provide Morocco with an economic, business and social boost. The Moroccan Railways are already one of our association’s most active members, taking part in a number of projects in the fields of infrastructure, safety and in particular security, with the UIC worldwide Security Platform chaired by Mr Moha Khaddour of ONCF.”* The construction of the first high speed line in Morocco is of particular significance to Jean Pierre Loubinoux, formerly Chief Executive of SNCF-International, as at the time he and Mr Mohammed Rabie Khlie had been in charge of preparing agreements between the Moroccan and French states. The agreements were finally signed in March 2009.

This first high speed link in the Maghreb paves the way for the development of a passenger transport system offering the best in terms of speed, safety, service quality and green credentials.

For further information on the project by the Moroccan Railways (ONCF): <http://www.oncf.ma>

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Note to Editor

High speed is developing at an impressive pace around the world. The global high speed rail network, allowing speeds of at least 250km/h, has reached almost 17,000km in total, and boasts approximately 2,100 high speed trains in service. Since the introduction of high speed rail in Japan in 1964, 18 billion people have travelled on high speed trains, a figure that is set to increase more than threefold by 2025.

According to present forecasts the high speed network is expected to total 42,000km in 15 years' time and the number of high speed trains in service is expected to rise to 5,600.

In addition to the "traditional" high speed countries such as Japan, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the Netherlands, the United States, Korea and China, other countries including Morocco, Poland, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Brazil and India will also have joined the high speed community, which demonstrates the global nature of high speed rail development. All these countries closely cooperate and contribute very actively to the work of UIC's Passenger & High Speed Department.

The countries that decided to introduce a high speed system consider it a means to face current and future mobility challenges while ensuring high-level performance, safety, environmental-friendliness and cost-effectiveness.

High speed is a major source of economic activity, employment and finance. The construction and maintenance of track, rolling stock and stations not only generate new jobs but also on-board services and new services in and around stations.

High speed increases the mobility of people and makes travelling comfortable. High speed trains can travel from one city centre to another; high speed is the only passenger transport mode in which it is possible to sit, stand and walk around, work on a laptop, use Wi-Fi and make calls on a mobile phone at any time while being provided with all other kinds of on-board services. High speed can win over passengers from air and road transport – faster train speeds mean fewer passengers on planes and in cars, therefore high speed rail is more efficient and a logical step forward for society as a whole.