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Organization of African Unity

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**STATEMENT OF H.E. DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 20TH ORDINARY SESSION
OF THE OAU LABOUR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMISSION
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA, 7 APRIL, 1997**

- **Dr. Kebede Tadesse,**
Minister in Charge of Social and Administration Sub-Sector
in the Office of the Prime Minister of the Federal
Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,

- **Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegation,**

- **Distinguished Representative of the ECA,**

Mr. Elias Mabere, Assistant Director-General
Responsible for the ILO Activities in Africa,

- **Distinguished Representative of the**
Arab Labour Organization,

- **Distinguished Delegates and Invited Guests,**

- **Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my pleasant duty to address this gathering on the occasion of the Twentieth Ordinary Session of the OAU Labour and Social Commission. May I first of all, join Dr. Kebede to welcome you all to Addis Ababa, the Headquarters of our Continental Organization. I also wish to take this opportunity to thank the Government of Ethiopia for having collaborated very closely with the General Secretariat in the preparations of this Conference.

This meeting is taking place against the background of difficult socio-economic conditions facing our Continent. Indeed, although Africa's socio-economic performance last year was generally positive, our countries have not been able to meet the expectations in terms of sustained growth and sustainable development. The inability of our countries to achieve sustained growth has been largely compounded by the impact of the debt burden. The excessive accumulation of the excruciating external debt of about 340.5 billion dollars and an annual debt service of about US\$24 billion continues to further exacerbate foreign exchange constraints. The stock of debt is now almost equivalent to the combined Gross Domestic Product of the Continent while the debt burden has already exceeded 25% of Africa's export earnings.

Clearly, it is imperative to seriously address Africa's debt crisis if the objective is to assist our Continent in its efforts at economic recovery and development. This will require commitment on the part of our countries and on the part of the creditor countries to undertake bold and courageous steps aimed at alleviating the Africa's debt burden. Time has come for our partners in the developed world to realize that the external debt is strangling our economies and our countries development efforts and to admit that Africa deserves a special treatment in a spirit of genuine co-operation, solidarity and long term mutual benefit.

In the meantime, most of our countries are engaged in profound socio-economic adjustment programmes with severe consequences such as falling educational standards, low school enrolment rates, inadequate housing and health facilities, escalating unemployment and under-employment, particularly among the youth, women, school

leavers and even university graduates and high infant mortality rates. I am informed that some of these problems will be addressed in the course of your deliberations. Allow me, however, to briefly refer to some of these problems.

There is no doubt that one of the most serious challenges facing our Continent in the social sector is the unemployment crisis. The employment situation in Africa which had deteriorated considerably over the past fifteen years continued to be grim in most of our countries with urban unemployment rates estimated in the 15 to 20% range; under-employment rates in the 25 to 50%; youth unemployment rates in the 25 to 40% range; while women unemployment range was twice the national average.

Against the backdrop of this employment situation, unless determined and improved employment and development policies are implemented, the employment crisis is likely to be aggravated up to the year 2010 with labour force growth rate rising about 2.8 percent and out-passing annual employment growth rate of 2.3 percent. It can therefore be appreciated that efforts to promote employment creation and improve the conditions of life and work may succeed if there are effective industrial, national, sub-regional and regional institutions to formulate design, co-ordinate, implement, monitor and evaluate appropriate promotion policies and programmes. The employment crisis in our Continent is a complex problem. It has no easy solution. But it poses a serious challenge to our Member States as it constitutes a threat to the social cohesion of our peoples. It also contributes to questioning the very existence of our peoples and undermining their dignity in life. I am therefore looking forward to an indepth exchange

of views on this important issue during your meeting which brings together the main socio-economic actors concerned with employment in our respective countries.

Another important issue that the Commission will address is the question of enhancing productivity as we enter the 21st Century which will be characterized with a tougher economic competition as a result of trade globalization and liberalization.

It is increasingly recognized worldwide that high levels of productivity lead to competitiveness in international market and to economic growth, development and prosperity. It is for that reason that productivity improvement in Africa has become a burning issue with dwindling availability of international assistance, the advent of the structural adjustment programmes and the recognition that the reserves of natural resources such as minerals are not infinite. I am therefore convinced that the issue of raising productivity in Africa should be at the core of our efforts aimed at ensuring speedy and sustained economic recovery and development of our Continent.

Another important item of your agenda is the Protection of the Child and Elimination of Child Labour in Africa. It is estimated that about 24 million children in Africa are forced to sacrifice their health, their education, their childhood and formative years, in a daily struggle for survival in violation of national legislation and international labour standards. These children work in dangerous and hazardous occupations which are harmful to their physical, mental, moral and spiritual development. The exploitation and subjugation of children at and through work would appear to be the simple most common form of child abuse and neglect in much of the world today.

The protection of children from work and at work is one of the basic principles and concerns of the OAU as is clearly spelt out in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Thus, while the long-term objective of the OAU is the effective abolition of child labour, it should be recognized that this will take time and will require progressive improvements in social and economic conditions in many countries. Besides, each country will be expected to formulate country-specific short-term, intermediate and long-term measures which should include, as a minimum, prevention of child work in hazardous occupations and industries, reduction of child labour by the youngest and most vulnerable, and protection of working children. These measures will, no doubt, attract the utmost attention of this meeting so that we could agree on a collective approach and programmes of action to fight this social scourge which, together with the use of children and armed conflicts constitutes a serious threat to our societies, their unity and cohesion and undermining the chances of generations of Africans for harmonious existence.

The need for an enhanced role of women in development efforts in our Continent is another objective vigorously pursued by the OAU and the international community and which is gaining momentum in Africa. Indeed, it is increasingly recognized that there cannot be any meaningful or sustainable development in Africa without the active, full and effective participation and involvement of women. I hope therefore that this meeting will examine the issue of the empowerment of women with the seriousness it deserves. I wish also to take this opportunity to appeal to our Member States to implement the various strategies, platforms and programmes of action adopted, at continental level, as a way forward towards empowering women in our societies.

These are some issues among many others this meeting is expected to address in considering the socio-economic conditions of our Continent. I would like to submit that, in the process, the Commission must also consider ways and means to involve the workers, the employers and governments in meeting the challenges of peace, democracy and development facing our Continent. I suggest that we should all aim at building a solid partnership between these three important political and socio-economic actors in our countries.

It is clear that the first challenge confronting our Continent is one of addressing the scourge of conflicts both internal and inter-states which are eroding the unity and cohesion of our peoples and undermining their efforts at development and progress. These fratricidal conflicts raging on the Continent can only bring about death and suffering to our peoples and drain the Continent of its precious resources and energies destroying the infrastructures and environment and drastically reversing the development process. These conflicts such as in Somalia, Liberia, Sudan, Burundi, Sierra Leone and now in Eastern Zaire coupled with natural disasters have swollen the number of refugees to over 7 million and the number of internally displaced persons to over 20 million. These statistics are a sad reality and a measure of the level of human and material destruction that bedevil our Continent today. These wars and conflicts are such a big drain on the scarce resources that Africa can ill-afford to lose. These resources should surely have been utilized to improve the conditions of life and work of the people in fields of education and training, health and in other aspects of human or social investment.

We should therefore redouble our efforts and work with renewed determination to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts afflicting our Continent. In 1993, our Leaders provided our Organization with a Mechanism to serve as a tool in our collective efforts to address the scourge of conflicts. This Mechanism place the main responsibility of preventing, managing and resolving conflicts on our Member States and the General Secretariat of the OAU. But the social partners in our individual Member States and collectively within your Commission could play an important role in promoting the objectives of the OAU Mechanism. I am convinced that in promoting a spirit of dialogue, equity, co-operation and social and peace cohesion, the workers, the employers and the Governments would go a long way in meeting the objectives of the OAU Mechanism for the Prevention, Management and Resolution of Conflicts. This is why I wish to urge this meeting to reflect on the contribution the Commission and its tripartite membership could make both at national and continental levels to the promotion of peace in our Continent.

The other important challenge confronting our Continent is the all-important issue of implementing the Abuja Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community. If we in Africa can take a cue from the integration processes being carried out in Europe, in the Americas, in Asia and elsewhere in the world, our Continent's economic, social and political survival will largely depend on how fast African countries will integrate themselves as we enter the 21st Century. Hence African countries need to pool their resources in order to enhance and achieve regional economic co-operation and integration so as to benefit from the economies of scale and be competitive in world trade. However, this fruitful process of economic co-operation and integration can only be

enhanced by a firm commitment and political will to honour the obligations African governments voluntarily enter into in our continental and regional co-operation institutions, and in the implementation of the programmes we collectively and individually adopt and which we are therefore enjoined to provide with the required moral, material and financial support they deserve.

In order to strengthen the African Economic Community, the Regional Economic Communities, which are the pillars and building blocs of the Community, should be strengthened by rationalizing the institutional framework for economic integration at the regional level. It was in that context that a Draft Protocol defining the relations that should exist between the African Economic Community and the Regional Economic Communities was presented to and discussed by the First Meeting of the OAU Economic and Social Council in November last year.

I wish to emphasize the fact that in order to be able to implement the Treaty in a balanced, effective and meaningful manner, all economic and social interest groups should participate and must be closely involved. The groups include the workers, employers, Chambers of Commerce, farmers, youth, women and students - indeed all the segments of the civil society must be mobilized and involved in its implementation. This is, therefore, clearly another important collective African endeavour where the membership of this Commission is expected to play a crucial role.

For our efforts at achieving peace, development and integration to succeed in our Continent, they should go hand in hand with parallel efforts aimed at promoting democracy. We should, and indeed must, recognize and appreciate that socio-economic, political and cultural development cannot fully take place in a context which is not propitious for the energies, dynamism and talents of our peoples to be released. We need to evolve and nurture a culture of democracy to sustain socio-economic efforts of our countries. We need to promote national unity and cohesion, especially through the politics of inclusion and the inculcation of a culture of peace and tolerance among the various segments of our people, based on the principles of respect of human rights and dignity, free and fair elections, as well as freedoms of the press, of speech, of association and of conscience. Our countries should also ensure speedy promotion of good governance, characterized by accountability, probity, transparency, equal application of the rule of law, and a clear separation of powers, as an objective and a condition for rapid sustainable development.

It is gratifying to note that this is the path being taken by most of our countries despite considerable difficulties. Clearly, the workers, the employers and the Governments, working together, have a key role to play in building institutions that can sustain democracy in our countries taking into account the realities of our respective societies.

I wish you successful deliberations.