

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU,
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM, AT THE OPENING OF THE
64TH ORDINARY SESSION OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

YAOUNDE, CAMEROON

4 JULY 1996

Mr. Chairman,

Your Excellency Simon Achidi Achu, Prime Minister of the Council of the Republic of Cameroon
Honourable Ministers and

Heads of Delegation,

~~Mr.~~ AMOALLO, UN Under SG + Ex-Sec. of the ECA.

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to join the host authorities in extending a warm welcome to you all to this beautiful city of Yaounde and to Cameroon. I also wish to thank the Government and the people of Cameroon for the hospitality extended to us since our arrival here.

We are pleased to be in Yaounde, the capital of one of the founding members of our Organization. We recall with gratitude the contribution made by this country in promoting African causes in a multifaceted manner. It is ^{as the Prime Minister has said,} but only natural that we should recall that this country has had the rare honour and privilege of producing two Secretaries General of our Organization. This in itself is an eloquent testimony to Cameroon's commitment to the Organization of African Unity. We therefore look forward to a successful session of the Council of Ministers and

an equally successful Assembly of Heads of State and Government.

I wish to commend the outgoing Chairman of the Council, the honourable Foreign Minister of Burkina Faso, Ablasse Ouedraogo, for the dedicated and efficient manner in which he presided over the last Session. I wish to thank him in particular for the close cooperation he extended to me during his tenure of office.

We are today living in a rapidly changing world. On the economic front, we are now increasingly faced with the globalization and liberalization of the world economy. Simultaneously, with the liberalization process, there is the reinforcement of major economic and trading blocs which are emerging as dominant forces that influence world economic trends and development. New frameworks of cooperation and new networks of relations and information are being established. In other words, we are witnessing a transformation in international economic relations with new approaches and technological innovations. Under our very eyes, the world is making

gigantic progress in various fields - information, science and technology, engineering, transport and communications. The world is caught in the throes of dramatic changes. The world of tomorrow is being prepared actively and intensively today. Unfortunately, we in Africa are not fully involved in this process despite the strenuous efforts made by our countries in effecting bold and courageous reforms. Indeed, in carrying out these reforms, the expectation was that they would enable Africa to become a full participant in the process of change. But the anticipated benefits from the reforms are yet to materialize.

On the domestic front however, the economic reforms and adjustment measures carried out by many African countries have yielded encouraging results, as reported recently by the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank. These are indeed encouraging signs. However, these positive results are yet to trickle down to the ordinary people.

It is of paramount importance therefore that we capitalize on these promising signs and improvements by building on and reinforcing them, and multiplying the success stories. The most serious single bottleneck that has to be tackled if Africa is to make an economic breakthrough, is the external indebtedness which continues to strangle our economies and severely undermine our development efforts. An alarming situation in which the continent's outstanding external debt stock represents more than 70% of its GDP, while debt servicing is expected to consume on the average 27% of earnings from exports of goods and services, is unbearable and cannot be sustained. Even if our negotiating position is weak and our major creditors are unable to sufficiently appreciate our difficulties, Africa must continue to press for a lasting solution to the debt problem which has become a major development crisis of our time. International cooperation for development will have neither meaning nor impact, if it fails to give priority to tackling Africa's external debt problem as well as filling the chronic resource gap commensurate with the

requirements of accelerated socio-economic development of our continent.

It has to be stressed that our continent has not been wanting in response to the trends and developments in the international economic arena, nor to its socio-economic predicament. Apart from national action with regard to reforms and adjustment, our countries adopted last year, the Cairo Agenda of Action for Relaunching Africa's social and economic development.

Our basic problem has been the lack of a sustained effort at the national level, to transform continental programmes into implementable projects, with the full involvement and participation of all sectors of the community. This is indeed a recognized problem that needs to be seriously addressed by current and future policy reform and adjustment programmes that should accord priority to building and strengthening Africa's capacity in this particular area. I strongly believe that the African Economic Community provides the most appropriate framework for mobilizing national efforts

towards continental integration. In this regard, I cannot overemphasize the urgency of convening the first Ministerial session of the Economic and Social Commission of the African Economic Community to adopt a programme of work for the implementation of the Abuja Treaty. I wish also to stress the need to strengthen the Regional Economic Communities which are the building blocs of the community.

In their development efforts, our countries have benefitted from the assistance and support of various international Organizations and institutions. I wish to express our profound appreciation for their contribution. It is in this connection that I would like to welcome the UN System-wide Special Initiative on Africa recently launched by the UN Secretary General, Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali. To ensure the success of this initiative, it is important that resources be made available.

In welcoming the Special Initiative, we have to see it as supportive to our individual and collective effort arising from the commitment that our countries have

entered into, in both the Cairo Agenda and the Treaty on the establishment of the African Economic Community.

Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the political plane, we are equally witnessing profound transformation in international behaviour. We see an increasing trend towards globalization and concern, on issues facing humankind particularly, human rights and issues of governance. At the same time, we equally see disturbing trends towards indifference to the fate of human beings, especially those in need and in difficulties. We are therefore living in a world of contradictions between the solidarity which does exist within the international community and the selfish interests which continue to prevail within it.

To say this does not mean that things were easier for us in the past. Indeed, they were not and we had to confront very difficult situations. Still, it could be

argued that, at the time, we were required to fit into a system that was designed without our involvement. Today, however, the situation is different and more complex. Indeed, while we are expected to be full partners in determining the parameters of the emerging international system, we paradoxically find ourselves increasingly being pushed to the periphery.

In the past, we tried to address our problems within the framework of our continental organization as the natural forum within which we promoted African solidarity and the cause of our peoples. Today, more than ever before, our continental organization remains the most credible framework for meeting the new challenges facing our continent. It is my conviction that we would be taken seriously, in Africa and beyond, only when we are seen to be effectively addressing the problems affecting our people and working together, as Africans, within the Organization of African Unity. Indeed, this was the course our Leaders had charted when they adopted the 1990 Declaration on the Fundamental Changes taking place in the World and Africa's Response and subsequently the 1993

Cairo Declaration on the Establishment of a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution.

Since the adoption of these two important Declarations, our continent has been going through major transformation. Most of our countries have undergone or are in the process of transition to political pluralism. The democratization process is gradually gaining root in the continent with all segments of society demanding to be involved in the process. We observe, with satisfaction, the growing awareness and sensitivity over the respect for and observance of human rights. However, beyond the holding of elections, we need to build institutions to sustain democracy in our countries; we need to nurture a culture of tolerance which underpins democracy. Above all, we need to cultivate the virtues of probity and integrity in public office; we need to fight against the social scourges such as corruption and nepotism which undermine the very fabric of society and erode confidence within our communities.

I am aware and indeed encouraged by the efforts of our Member States in promoting democracy and human rights. These efforts are being made at a time when the Member States are going through severe socio-economic conditions and managing serious contradictions within our societies.

These efforts should be understood against the imperative of preserving peace, unity and cohesion in our societies. Indeed, the search for peace, security and stability in our countries is the most urgent and important endeavour in our continent. Clearly, peace, security and stability should constitute the most precious asset for our people.

For instance, what do the people of Liberia, Somalia and Burundi deserve most other than peace, sustainable peace - peace at last!

The most recent events in Monrovia with their attendant killings, mayhem and destruction, pained us all. The untold and extreme suffering and hardship imposed on the people of Liberia defies all description and reason.

The resumption of hostilities in Monrovia has undermined the considerable and commendable efforts and sacrifices being made by the countries of the region and provoked a feeling of frustration within and outside Africa.

I still would like to hope however, that the faction leaders in Liberia would rise above their personal differences and ambitions in the interest of peace for their people. I also want to believe that they would finally agree to genuinely commit themselves to the peace process and to fully cooperate with ECOMOG. I wish in this respect, to underline the important role of the international community in supporting ECOMOG both logistically and financially. Regrettably, such support has thus far been too little to have the desired impact.

Developments in Burundi give us the same frustrations and concerns as in Liberia. This is one conflict situation where Africa and the international community have not failed to live up to their responsibilities. You are all aware of the sustained efforts deployed by our Organization to contain and resolve the crisis since its inception in Burundi.

Here again, group interests and positions have prevailed over reason and the aspirations of the people of Burundi for peace and national reconciliation.

Today, our hope lies in the ongoing efforts by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere aimed at promoting peace and national reconciliation through dialogue in Burundi. These efforts enjoy the full support of the OAU and the international community. The recent Regional Summit held in Arusha was a timely and encouraging initiative. The decisions reached in Arusha which called for the need of democracy and security for all the people of Burundi, as well as for the involvement of all parties and groups in the national dialogue, deserve our full support.

The tragedy in Somalia continues to haunt the international community. The division of the country, the destruction of properties and infrastructure, the sporadic fighting and the humanitarian crisis continue to pose a serious challenge to us all.

We have repeatedly stated that the principal responsibility of restoring peace and harmony in Somalia lies on the people of Somalia themselves, particularly on their leaders. This however should not mean that the international community and Africa in particular should relax their efforts at assisting the people of Somalia. On our part, we wish to reaffirm our disposition to do whatever is possible to help in the search for lasting solution. In the meantime, we should support and encourage the efforts made in various parts of the country towards security, stability and development. These efforts are quite evident at the grassroot level.

Mr. Chairman,

I have focused on the situation in Liberia, Burundi and Somalia which continue to pose a serious challenge to us. There are also other conflict situations which continue to engage our attention. But there are others where we have been able to achieve some progress. I am referring particularly to the political crisis which erupted in the Comoros towards the end of last year following the mercenary led attempted coup. The prompt and swift action by the OAU and its subsequent and sustained efforts in close cooperation with the countries of the region, led to the defusing of the crisis and enabled the holding of the Presidential Elections in that country. I wish to seize the opportunity to reiterate my appreciation to President Albert Zafy of Madagascar for his personal efforts during the Antananarivo Conference which brought together, under the auspices of the OAU, the delegations of the then President of the Republic and the Government of National Unity. I also wish to put on record my thanks to Foreign Minister Jacques Sylla of Madagascar, for his own important role

in working tirelessly with the OAU Team towards the successful conclusion of the Antananarivo Conference. Since then, normalcy has returned to the Comoros and I hope that this new era of peace and national harmony will enable the people of that country to focus on development issues.

We have also been able to contribute, together with the Cote d'Ivoire, the United Nations and other organizations, towards promoting dialogue between the government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). I wish to seize the opportunity to encourage both parties to persevere on the path of dialogue to resolve all other outstanding issues. I wish to pay special tribute to President ^{HENRY} Konan Bedie and the Government of Cote d'Ivoire, for their valuable contribution. Allow me also to commend Foreign Minister Amara Essy of Cote d'Ivoire, for his untiring efforts.

These achievements might look modest but they are very significant. They are an illustration of what can be achieved when the parties to the conflict demonstrate

good will and show a reasonable degree of cooperation with the OAU. Above all, they are a clear indication of the fact that we are in the right direction and they encourage us to pursue our efforts within the context of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. Our Mechanism is still young and we are learning from our experiences. That is why I strongly believe that everything should be done to strengthen the capacity and the efficiency of the Mechanism to perform its responsibilities. This can only be done through a partnership between the Organization of African Unity's General Secretariat and its Member States.

I cannot conclude my statement without referring to the immense suffering of millions of refugees and displaced children, women and men who have been forced to leave their ancestral homes for an uncertain life in unknown places. The plight of these our unfortunate brothers and sisters constitute an acute humanitarian tragedy on our continent which is the concern of us all.

I wish to reiterate my appeal to our fellow Africans to continue to show compassion and demonstrate solidarity with our brothers and sisters in need, despite their own difficulties. I also wish to urge our Member States to take all measures to facilitate an early return of refugees and displaced persons in conformity with the relevant international and OAU Conventions. Finally, I wish to appeal to the international community to provide assistance commensurate with the magnitude of the tragedy.

I also wish to make particular reference to the plight of children in conflict situations. The suffering and the agony of the hundreds of thousands of innocent children caught in the midst of wars and hostilities is a matter of our collective concern. It is in recognition of the very special circumstances that face children in conflict that UNICEF, with the support of the OAU, has taken the initiative of convening a Children's mini Summit. This Summit is expected to be held here in Yaounde on the 6 and 7 July 1996 with the participation of children from 12 African countries which had to face

or are still facing conflict situations. The children who will participate in the mini Summit witnessed and experienced the horrors of war and survived. They are in a unique position to make the most compelling case in favour of durable peace.

I therefore wish to welcome the initiative which will allow a group of selected children to express their feelings and demands on behalf of more than half of the continent's population of 18 years and under. Two of these children, one girl and one boy will have the opportunity to address the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. They will no doubt convey the ideals, enthusiasm, and expectations of the African children who are ready to serve as agents for change and understanding across all kinds of divide.

Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the Introductory Note to my Report which is before you, I have attempted to cover other major areas of concern for your attention and consideration. Clearly, the challenges before us are tremendous. We have no other option but to act and to act together with determination and renewed commitment to address the problems confronting us so that our continent and people can take their rightful place in the family of nations. We have to find strength and confidence in ourselves, muster the energies and resources of our people, and work hand in hand so that our voice is heard and our place recognized.