



ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY

**STATEMENT BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU
AT THE OPENING OF THE 74TH ORDINARY
SESSION OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS**

LUSAKA, ZAMBIA

5TH JULY 2001

**Your Honour Enock Kavindele, Vice-President
of the Republic of Zambia,**

Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegations,

**Distinguished United Nations Under-Secretary-General and
Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic
Commission for Africa,**

**Distinguished Chief Executives of the Regional
Economic Communities,**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with profound sadness that I learnt of the shocking news of the sudden and untimely passing away late last night, of the Vice President of the United Republic of Tanzania, Dr. Omar Ali JUMA. Dr. Omar has been Vice President of the country since 1995. Before that he was the Chief Minister of the Zanzibar Government. He was a dedicated leader of Tanzania and a firm believer and advocate of the causes which our Continental Organization stands for in particular the lofty cause of Pan-Africanism and African economic, political and social integration. He was also for me a personal and respected friend and colleague. His death is certainly a tremendous blow to his family, the President, Government and People of Tanzania as it is to all of us who were close to him. I wish therefore to join our Chairman in extending our profound condolences to the Tanzanian delegation and through them to President Benjamin Mkapa, the Government and People of Tanzania as well as to the bereaved family.

It now gives me great pleasure to join His Honour Enock Kavindele in welcoming you all to this 74th Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers taking place here in this beautiful African City of Lusaka. I should like to pay a deserving tribute to the Government and People of the Republic of Zambia for the warmth of the hospitality that they have extended to us all since our arrival here. We all feel happy to be back in Lusaka which has served as a home to many of the participants of this Conference, particularly, those who had been associated with the liberation struggle that took place in this part of the Continent. Indeed we recall with particular pride the inspiration that Zambia provided to millions of Africans and many other friends of our Continent as it served with unshakeable commitment and enormous sacrifices as one of the most important pillars of resistance against colonialism, racism and apartheid. The holding of this Council and indeed the Summit in

Lusaka, therefore, is in many ways a recognition and appreciation to the historic role played by this country in our Continent's struggle for freedom, human dignity and development.

I wish at the outset to express my gratitude to our brother, Dr. Ali Treki, Minister of African Unity of the People's Bureau of the Great Socialist People Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, and the Bureau of the 73th Session of Council, for the very able manner that he conducted the affairs of Council since our last Session in Tripoli. Both the Chairman and his country, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya had in so many ways exhibited the clear commitment of the Jamahiriya to African causes. I would also like to thank the Minister for the cooperation that he extended to the General Secretariat and myself during the period. I wish also to extend a warm welcome to the in-coming Chairman of Council, Foreign Minister Walubita of Zambia, and to assure him of our cooperation in promoting the larger interests of our Continent.

This Session of Council is crucial in many ways. This is especially so given the issues that are to be deliberated upon. These include the important question relating to the operationalisation of the African Union for which our leaders will expect the advice of Council on the basis of the decisions that were taken by the 5th Extra-ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Sirte, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. In effect, the historic decisions that the 37th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government will be taking in response to the mandate of the Sirte Extra-ordinary Session will in no small measure be influenced by the quality and outcome of the deliberations that will take place during Council's Session.

Beyond the agenda items, it is a matter of fact that not many other Sessions of the Policy Organs of the OAU have attracted as much attention as this Session of Council and the forthcoming Session of the Assembly. In every part of the Continent and outside the Continent there are great expectations that the meetings that are taking place in Lusaka will be another historic milestone in the journey of Africans to attain closer unity and solidarity among the peoples of the Continent. The anticipated decisions on the transformation of the OAU into the African Union therefore, in more ways than one, represent the realization of the aspirations of the African peoples and their leaders to overcome the weaknesses brought about by a history of fragmentation and division. The fact that within less than one year, 45 Member States of our Continental Organization have ratified the Constitutive Act, and that very shortly the remaining Member States are expected to do so, is a testimony to the commitment and determination to attain this most profound ideal of Continental unity.

This Session of Council cannot therefore afford to disappoint or let down the vast majority of the peoples of this Continent who are determined to foster closer unity as a means of overcoming the political and socio-economic challenges confronting them and restoring their dignity in order to bequeath to succeeding generations of Africans, a Continent that is best placed to address the challenges that confront it.

While highlighting the background of hope and optimism against which this Session is taking place, I wish to express the profound pre-occupation that I have over the developments that have occurred in some parts of the Continent. I am concerned that as we meet here in Lusaka, there are still worrying trends of increasing insecurity and armed conflict, particularly in the Great Lakes Region with potentials of destabilizing many of the countries in the region. At a time when there is a growing feeling that progress is being made in the peace process in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is regrettable that the security situation in the Republic of Burundi continues to deteriorate. We are also concerned over the recent infiltration and fighting into the Republic of Rwanda.

Having witnessed the tremendous efforts that had been deployed by President Frederick Chiluba of Zambia other regional leaders as well as Sir Ketumile Masire, Former President of Botswana and facilitator of the inter-Congolese Dialogue to promote peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo and also the efforts of former President Nelson Mandela to bring peace among the conflicting parties in Burundi, the strengthening of the peace process in the Great Lakes Region, should receive the serious and urgent attention and consideration of this Session of Council.

In West Africa, the situation prevailing among the countries of the Mano River Union, continue to be a matter of concern. While welcoming the recent progress made in the peace process in the Republic of Sierra Leone, particularly the progress in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, there is need to address the tension and conflict which have undermined the good neighbourly relations between Liberia and Guinea in particular, but also the potentials for destabilizing the peace process in Sierra Leone. I wish in this regard, to appeal to the countries of the Mano River Union to extend all possible cooperation to the efforts by the leaders of ECOWAS, particularly those deployed by the President Konare of Mali, President Obasanjo of Nigeria and President Eyadema of Togo on behalf of the region.

There are other conflict situations in our Continent such as the continued war in Angola due to the continued intransigence of the UNITA leader Mr. Jonas Savimbi, which should also be of concern to this

Session of Council. Clearly, at a time that we are talking about operationalisation of the African Union, we need to work assiduously for the ending of conflicts on the Continent. These conflicts have been a major haemorrhage on the limited resources of many of our countries. These resources are required to address the many challenges that have undermined our efforts towards socio-economic development and integration. Obviously, our efforts and commitment to build a Union will be greatly undermined, if we continue to allow the social fabric of many of our societies to be torn apart by fratricidal conflicts and instability.

Last April, our leaders met in Abuja, Nigeria for the Summit on HIV/Aids, Tuberculosis and other related infectious diseases. That Summit was a major success in terms of sensitizing our people and our countries on the devastating impact of this pandemic on our populations. The Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on HIV/AIDS in New York last month provided our leaders and governments with yet another opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to address this scourge with all the resources at our disposal.

We have reached a key moment in the struggle against the HIV-AIDS pandemic. The parameters for action are quite clear. We have made commitments. We have even outlined a Continental framework of action. It is now time to act and to act expeditiously. The pandemic is currently ravaging on the cradle of our future -our youths and children. If the battle is lost in this front, hopes for our Continent will be shattered and all of us as leaders will stand indicted.

It is my hope that given the enormous magnitude of the HIV/Aids crisis in Africa and notwithstanding the belated response of many countries, this Session of Council and next week of the Assembly will demonstrate an equally determined commitment to mobilize the necessary political, social, economic and human resources to withstand the onslaught of the pandemic. Above all we need to follow-up and do so in a coordinated way the outcome of the Abuja Summit as well that of the UN General Assembly Special Session.

Apart from being haunted by the specter of HIV-AIDS and other killer diseases such as Malaria, the African child has been threatened by a lot of other catastrophic situations, including being drafted into combat situations, subjected to labour recruitment, exposed to illicit drugs, and often deprived of basic needs. With such a bleak up bringing these children are denied from such an early age a prospective future and thus condemning a substantial part of the future of this Continent to despair. It is with this concern that the OAU in cooperation with UNICEF and other partners organized a Pan-African Forum on the Future of Children that was graciously hosted by the Arab Republic of Egypt and chaired by

Her Excellency the First Lady of Egypt, Madame Suzanne Mubarak. This forum was the key event in the run-up to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children, which will take place in September. The African common position agreed upon at the Forum merit the full support of this Council.

This year, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees is commemorating its Fiftieth Anniversary. In an ideal world where women and men find no need to vote with their feet, where human and peoples rights are scrupulously respected and where conflicts are either prevented or when they occur they are expeditiously resolved, the need for such a commemoration would hardly have been there. But, in the real world in which we live where violations abound and conflicts continue to haunt us, the role, relevance and significance of the United Nations Refugee agency need hardly be overemphasized. As a Continent, which unfortunately continues to produce a disproportionate number of refugees and displaced persons, we recognize and value with a particular sense of appreciation the important role of the UNHCR.

But, beyond reinforcing our cooperation with this vital international humanitarian agency, we should make use of the Anniversary to redouble our efforts in creating conditions in our societies so that people do not have to flee for fear of persecution or repression. At the same time, while trying to find durable solutions to the refugee crisis, we must treat those who have been forced by circumstances to be refugees and displaced persons with understanding, compassion, and human solidarity.

Let me conclude by reiterating the special importance of this session of Council in charting the way forward for the attainment of the cherished desire of the people of this Continent for unity, solidarity and cohesion with a view to equipping ourselves more effectively in order to surmount the obtaining challenges. I look forward to its deliberations, which will prepare for the major decisions that our leaders will make and also provide guidance to the work of the General Secretariat.

I thank you.