

STATEMENT BY H.E. DR SALIM AHMED SALIM, OAU
SECRETARY GENERAL, AT THE COMORIAN INTER-ISLAND
CONFERENCE, ANTANANARIVO, MADAGASCAR,
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- Your Excellency Mr Didier RATSIRAKA, President of the Republic of Madagascar,
- Your Excellency Mr Tadjiddine Ben Said MASSONDE, Interim President of the Islamic Federal Republic of Comoros,
- Your Excellency Mr Abbas Djoussouf, Prime Minister of the Islamic Federal Republic of Comoros,
- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mauritius,
- Honourable Ministers from Madagascar, Seychelles, Algeria, and Comoros,
- Your Excellency Mr Michel Rocard, former Prime Minister of France and currently President of the Development and Cooperation Commission of the European Parliament,
- Distinguished Representatives of the neighbouring countries, the OAU Central Organ Troika, the United Nations, the League of Arab States, the European Union, the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council and other representatives of OAU Member States,
- Distinguished Representatives of the Comorian Parties,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here today to witness an important and significant moment in the history of the Comoros and its people. We all came here from various parts of the Continent and the world for a unique and noble purpose : the purpose of peace and reconciliation.

We came here with the sole aim of encouraging the Comorian Parties to talk to each other and to discuss their problems and differences and reconcile. We came here fully aware of the fact that differences do emerge among members of the same community but also in firm belief that ultimately these differences can only be resolved through dialogue.

We have converged here in Antananarivo to rally behind our brothers and sisters from Comoros, because we care for them and their country as we do for any other country and people of our Continent. Their difficulties and agonies are ours ; their successes and well-being are also ours.

That is why I am grateful to the Comorian Parties for having responded promptly and positively to the invitation extended to them by our Continental Organization. Their presence here today is a clear demonstration of their commitment to seeking a solution to the crisis in their country, in a spirit of brotherhood, under the auspices of the OAU and the International Community at large.

I am also grateful to the Government and people of Madagascar for hosting this Comorian Inter-Island Conference and for providing the conditions most conducive for this meeting. I wish, in particular, to

express my profound appreciation and gratitude to President Didier Ratsiraka for gracing the occasion with his presence. His presence amongst us is a further testimony to his personal commitment and that of his country to peace, security and stability in neighbouring Comoros as well as in the region and in the Continent as a whole. Indeed, it is on record that, throughout the various crises it had experienced since its Independence, Comoros has always enjoyed the unwavering support and solidarity of Madagascar. Mr President, please accept our heart-felt appreciation for this exemplary commitment and dedication, which is a reflection of your attachment to the ideals of Pan-Africanism and continental solidarity. This is to your honour and to the honour of your country.

I would like also to salute the presence, amongst us, of the Interim President of the Islamic Federal republic of Comoros and commend him and his Government for the laudable efforts they have been deploying with a view to creating propitious conditions for the holding of the Conference.

I further wish to welcome the representatives attending this Conference as official observers and to express to them our appreciation for the support they have been extending to the OAU in its efforts aimed at seeking an early solution to the crisis in Comoros. I wish to thank them all for joining us in this peace endeavour. Their presence in this Conference is a demonstration of their commitment to unity, peace and stability in Comoros. I believe it is also a demonstration of their readiness to assist in the implementation of any agreement that we fervently hope, will emerge from this forum.

Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the presence of Mr Michel Rocard, former Prime Minister of France and currently President of the Development and Cooperation Commission of the European Parliament. Mr Rocard has been following closely the developments in Comoros, on behalf of the European Union, and has been consulting with us on a regular basis. I thank him for supporting us during this Conference, which is aimed at promoting understanding among the Comorian Parties, based on the Addis Ababa Agreement.

Sixteen months have elapsed since the Comorian Parties met in Addis Ababa and agreed to hold, under the auspices of the OAU and in accordance with the format of the Addis Ababa International Conference, an Inter-Island Comorian Conference to define a new institutional framework for their country, which takes into account the legitimate aspirations of the Islands and their inhabitants. I must say that it has not been easy to convene this Conference, for distrust and misunderstanding continued to prevail among the Comorian Parties.

This atmosphere of distrust and misunderstanding contributed to protracting the crisis unnecessarily, thus deepening the frustration among the Parties and the population and further exacerbating the tension in the Islands. The situation was further compounded by the unfortunate developments that took place in Anjouan resulting in fratricidal fighting. The Island of Grande Comore was not spared of this negative trend, as isolated but disturbing incidents directed against Comorians of Anjouanese origin erupted.

Fortunately, these sad developments now seem to be over. Indeed, the Comorian Parties seem to have learnt a lesson from these regrettable events and are now determined to engage on a path of a meaningful dialogue. The goodwill and disposition shown by the Comorian Parties at the recent Round Table Technical Meeting held in Moheli were indeed very encouraging. I commend the Comorian Parties for that and now urge them to demonstrate, at this Conference, the same will and determination to seek a solution to the crisis through dialogue in a spirit of accommodation and compromise. In other words, no one should believe that he or she is the embodiment of truth and no one should believe that he or she has the monopoly of wisdom. I, therefore, call on all the Comorian Parties to have the humility to listen to each other and to make a deliberate effort to understand each other. This is the basis of the meaningful dialogue that we hope will take place in this Conference.

We, at the OAU, have been working tirelessly towards creating the conditions propitious for holding this Inter-Island Comorian Conference and, in this respect, I would like to pay special tribute to the neighbouring countries for their commendable efforts and contribution in the search for a peaceful solution to the crisis. I would like to acknowledge, in this regard, the important co-ordinating role played by South Africa.

After so much effort and patience, we are happy to see the Comorian Parties meeting here at last. As they meet to discuss the future of their country, I wish, as the Secretary General of the

Organisation of African Unity, who is naturally attached to the principle of unity and solidarity of the African people, but also as an Islander myself who understands the problems and concerns of the Islands, and as a brother, who has been closely associated with the history of Comoros and who shares the concerns and aspirations of its people, to reiterate to them, on this solemn occasion, my full support in their effort to get their act together in the spirit of reconciliation.

We are all quite familiar with the turbulent history of Comoros and the various crises it has gone through since its Independence. It is a country that has the unenviable record of coups and counter-coups leading to political instability. This situation of instability has severely hampered the socio-economic development of the country and generated unhealthy political practices as well as gross economic mismanagement. It has also undermined efforts at building national unity and cohesion. As a result, there have been uneven development and inequitable distribution of resources, both among and within the Islands, thus bringing about the increasing marginalisation and frustration of large sectors of the population.

The crisis which erupted in Anjouan in 1997 did not therefore come out of the blues. It came against the background of the difficult history and conditions of Comoros. The anger and frustration of the population that compounded the problem should not be ignored. Rather, it should be considered as a reflection of the genuine concerns of the population to take part fully in the management of their affairs and to assume their fair share in forging a common destiny for the Comorian people and country.

I am encouraged to note that there is an increasing recognition of the merit of addressing the legitimate concerns of the population of the Islands in the context of maintaining the unity of the country, whose institutions need however to be reviewed in terms of their relevance and functioning.

I therefore see an understanding emerging among the Comorian parties on living differently but still together. This is the challenge of this Conference, and the responsibility that must be shouldered by each and every Comorian present at this Conference. We of the OAU family and the International Community at large are here only to assist. For their part, the people of Comoros in the Islands and in the Diaspora are looking forward eagerly to a successful Inter-Island Conference in Antananarivo which is to determine their common future. I hope that your Conference will rise to this legitimate expectation and aspiration.