

ECOWAS ASSEMBLY OF HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT

**STATEMENT BY DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU**

ABUJA, NIGERIA

26 JULY 1996

Your Excellency, President J.J. Rawlings,
Head of State of Ghana and
Current Chairman of ECOWAS,
Your Excellency General Sani Abacha,
Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,
Your Excellencies Heads of State and Government
and Heads of Delegation,
Your Excellencies, the First Ladies,
Your Excellency Edouard Benjamin,
Executive Secretary of ECOWAS,
Distinguished Delegates, Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few weeks ago, most of us here had gathered in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon to reflect over the most urgent issues confronting our continent in the political as well as socio-economic areas.

Today, we gather within the framework of the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) to address the most specific problems of the Region.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to address this august Assembly and to first pay tribute to ECOWAS, on this her twenty first year of existence, for her efforts to achieve economic integration in the Region and for her relentless efforts to attain peace and security in the region.

Once more Abuja, the capital city of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is hosting this Summit. We are pleased to be here again and wish to pay tribute to this country well known for its impeccable commitment to the cause of Africa and African Unity. It is, therefore, with particular pleasure that I wish to convey our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to President Sani Abacha, the Government and people of Nigeria

for their invaluable contribution to the promotion of African solidarity and unity and for hosting the current Summit.

Secondly, I also wish to register our gratitude and appreciation to President J.J. Rawlings of Ghana for the effective and efficient manner in which he has conducted the affairs of the community over the last two years, and more particularly, for the efforts he has deployed towards the promotion of peace in Liberia.

Mr. Chairman,

At a time when the rest of the world is actively engaged in furthering its socio-economic development, we in Africa have no right to squander our meagre resources and energies on unproductive ventures. Africa owes it to herself, to the coming generations to pool her resources together to ensure that she is part of the inescapable march towards liberalization and globalization of the world economy. We cannot afford to be left gaping on the platform while the train to achieve these ends is on the move. History will not forgive us, should we fail to take advantage of the present circumstances.

We have collectively already shown the way by defining what is required for ourselves. I am referring here to the Cairo Agenda for Action - an Agenda which was elaborated by an extraordinary session of the Council of Ministers in March 1995 to relaunch Africa's Economic and Social Development. I am also referring to the bold step we took towards economic integration of our continent when we signed in this very city the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community - popularly known as the Abuja Treaty which came into force in May 1994.

What is required of us today, we leaders of this continent which has all the potential desired to make of it a prosperous region of the world, is to seriously implement the decisions we have taken. Let us have the courage of our intentions and show the seriousness of purpose that the times call for.

Time is indeed of essence. That is why we at the OAU General Secretariat are giving added priority to addressing the economic problems that beset our continent. In this respect we have, following the decision of the Yaounde Summit, already fixed the dates to hold the first Ministerial Session of the OAU ECOSOC - that is from 28 to 30 October 1996.

This historic Ministerial Session will actually pave the way for the effective establishment of the African Economic Community and define a concrete plan of action to be executed between now and the year 2000. The Community will depend, first and foremost on Regional Economic Communities which need to be strengthened and consolidated where they exist and created where there is none. This is why it is absolutely essential that ECOWAS, as one of the relatively older regional communities, needs to readjust herself to ensure that the policies being considered at its level are in harmony with the provisions of the Abuja Treaty. In this respect, the OAU has been pleased to offer its expert assistance to your community, precisely to help in this direction. We are offering the same expertise to the other communities of the Continent.

In this regard, it is important that the Protocol regulating the relations between the OAU and the Regional Economic Communities be appropriately considered by your Organization so that the required mandate may be given both to the OAU and to the REC's at the forthcoming ECOSOC Ministerial Session to formally sign it.

Mr. Chairman,

If we have not been able to make any marked progress hitherto in our endeavours to achieve economic growth, it is mainly because of lack of a sustained effort at the national as well as regional levels to transform continental programs into implementable projects, with the full involvement and participation of all sectors of our societies. This is indeed a recognized problem that needs to be seriously addressed by current and future policy

reforms and adjustment programs, that should accord priority to building and strengthening Africa's capacity in this particular area.

The obstacles that we face in this thrust are two-pronged: those of our own making and those imposed on us from outside. We must effectively address both.

First is the question of governance: Most of the aspects of good governance - an essential component of social and economic development - are within our power to attain. Democratic traditions, the rule of law and human rights must be pursued relentlessly. Indiscipline, poor management of our economies, natural resources and environment - corruption, erosion of human values and morals, need to be addressed very seriously in order not only to uphold respect and dignity of our continent, but also to create a more conducive environment for investment and development.

Second, as far as the externally induced obstacles are concerned, Africa needs to stand up collectively and defend her interests more forcefully. An African cause must be championed by Africans themselves.

The most serious bottleneck that has to be tackled if Africa is to make an economic breakthrough, is the question of external indebtedness which is a virtual milestone on our neck. The recent Yaounde Summit has rightly recognized the need for us to develop a concerted action to tackle the debt overhang of our continent. In fact, the OAU Contact Group on Debt is being revitalized with a fresh mandate. The OAU Secretariat is actively engaged in implementing the decision of the Summit and will very soon propose a firm action programme which could be the basis for negotiations with our creditors, principally as regards our multilateral debt.

Mr. Chairman,

I firmly believe that we need to translate concretely the goodwill that exists with respect to economic cooperation and integration of our continent. It is time for us to demonstrate that we have the capacity of not only talking about our ills and lamenting over them but also the capability of acting in a concerted manner to overcome them.

Mr. Chairman,

One of the significant dimensions and, indeed, of the emerging consensus among our Member States, is the recognition of the inextricable link between Conflict Resolution and Socio-Economic Development. For, without peace and stability, there can be no development; and without development, peace and security cannot be durable.

I am aware and indeed encouraged by the efforts of our Member States in promoting democracy and human rights. These efforts should be undertaken 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, and must constitute the most precious asset for our people. In this regard, I wish to commend the considerable efforts and sacrifices being made by the countries of the region in search for peace and stability in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In Liberia, the recent events in Monrovia with their attendant killings, mayhem and destruction, pains us all. The untold and extreme suffering and hardship imposed on the people of Liberia defies all description and reason. As we continue to call for both political and practical support for the efforts of the countries of the region, we call on the faction leaders in Liberia to show greater commitments to the peace process.

At the same time, I wish to reiterate our tribute to the countries of ECOWAS for their herculean efforts. We especially recognize the immense sacrifices of the ECOMOG contributing countries. And here I wish to join the Head of State of Nigeria, General Sani Abacha in commending the officers and men of ECOMOG for their service not only to Liberia but for Africa as a whole. The International Community is clearly challenged to support effectively these serious and sustained efforts by African countries to find a solution to the Liberian crisis.

We are encouraged by recent developments in Sierra Leone. There seems to be light at the end of the tunnel though some problems still exist. I salute President Tejja Kabbah for his statesmanship and commitment to peace.

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Heads of State
and Heads of Government,
Distinguished Heads of Delegations,

I am sure you will not expect me to conclude my statement without referring to the situation in Burundi which is currently at the centre of Africa's and international concern.

Among the crises which continue to bedevil our continent is the unfolding tragedy in Burundi. Killings, assassinations and massacres have been perpetrated on a routine basis. The will of the people of Burundi as clearly demonstrated in the first ever free and fair elections in that country in June 1993 leading to the election of President Melchior Ndadaye was stifled and effectively suffocated starting with the brutal assassination of the elected President and his immediate collaborators by elements of the army - an army which is supposed to protect and defend the constitution and its Commander-in-Chief.

The coup which started in October 1993 was apparently completed yesterday when the Burundian Army which continues to be essentially a mono-ethnic institution, this time turned against President Ntibantuganya and in an unconstitutional and totally illegal manner decided to take over the reigns of the country. This illegal act constitutes a dramatic escalation of the crisis. It is particularly sad that the coup has come at a time when countries of the region and Africa as a whole, with the support of the international community, have been making serious and determined efforts aimed at promoting democracy and security for all under the auspices of the former President of Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere.

In the last three years, Africa and the OAU have invested heavily to restore normalcy, understanding and harmony among the people of Burundi in an attempt to avoid a catastrophe. Africa's actions have been in many domains. For example, for more than two years now, we have maintained an OAU mission in Burundi. Among the members of the mission have been military officers from a number of African countries who have served with distinction and unwavering commitment and in very difficult circumstances with the sole objective of promoting confidence and understanding among the population of Burundi of all ethnic groups. We have had officers from Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Tunisia. Furthermore, the OAU at different levels, has been actively engaged in attempts to avoid a disaster and create conditions towards lasting peace, security and stability in that beautiful and unfortunate country. The international community at large and especially the United Nations have also played an important contribution in avoiding an escalation of the crisis in the country.

It is therefore a matter of profound sadness, regrets and indignation that the extremists clearly now supported by the Army have treated all these efforts with contempt and decided to take the plunge. What happened in Bujumbura yesterday requires nothing less than our strongest opposition. I am seriously concerned that it is a prescription for further ethnic violence and unless effectively contained, a disaster could be in the making.

Africa cannot and should not accept this illegality.

Convening in an urgent session yesterday morning in Addis Ababa, prior to the news of the coup, the Central Organ of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution inter alia declared as follows :

" The Central Organ expressed its deep concern at the deteriorating situation in Burundi which has now become extremely dangerous and highly explosive. The Central Organ warned, in no uncertain terms, against any attempt to overthrow the legitimate government of President Sylvestre Ntibantuganya. Any attempt to take over power through illegal means will not be accepted by Africa and will be strongly condemned and opposed by the Organization of African Unity.

The Central Organ called upon Member States and the international community at large to prepare themselves to isolate completely any such regime which could take over leadership in Burundi through the use of force or any other pretext. In such an event, Member States and the International Community should also be prepared to impose sanctions against the regime."

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Heads of State
and Government,

What has happened in Burundi constitutes an affront and a challenge to Africa and the world community as a whole. We cannot and must not allow the forces of extremism and bigotry to run roughshod on the country's constitution and defy the aspirations of the overwhelming majority of the people of Burundi.

This latest attempt to impose domination over the people of Burundi must be rejected. The coup makers and their fellow extremists must be given no respite. We must insist on restoration of legality. We must press for the resumption of negotiations which can guarantee democracy and security for all the people of Burundi, Hutus, Tutsis and Twas. This is the course of action which the just concluded Yaounde Summit of the Organization of African Unity has fully endorsed. It is the only rational and viable approach to provide a lasting resolution to the conflict and avoid the repetition of the Rwanda tragedy in Burundi.

Mr. Chairman,

Africa needs to enhance its image, uphold its dignity, and its respect in the world. These attributes never come of their own. They have to be earned, through hard work for peace and stability, for the social and economic development of our mother continent, Africa. Let us work for greater and sustainable democracy. Let us advocate and work for greater and sustainable international economic equity. Let us work for greater stability, development and lasting peace on our beloved continent. The role of ECOWAS in this respect is pivotal.

I thank you

Abuja, Friday, July 26, 1996.