



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY H.E. DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM, SECRETARY
GENERAL OF THE OAU TO THE FOLLOW-UP COMMITTEE
MEETING TO THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON ASSISTANCE
TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS
IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION**

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

February 29, 1996

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me start by welcoming Ministers and other representatives attending this OAU/UNHCR Second Meeting of the Follow-up Committee on the Implementation of the Bujumbura Conference Plan of Action on Assistance to Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in the Great Lakes Region and by also expressing my profound gratitude to His Excellency Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, former President of the United Republic of Tanzania, who has accepted our invitation to attend. I also wish to note with satisfaction the presence of the Special Representatives of the United Nations Secretary General for Rwanda and Burundi respectively as well as the Special Envoy of the European Union for Burundi.

The purpose of this meeting is to review the implementation of the Plan of Action since the Bujumbura Conference took place in February 1, 1995; to take stock of the current situation in the Great Lakes Region, to evaluate the implementation of the Plan of Action, to identify the problems encountered so far, and to chart the course for future action.

The situation in the Great Lakes Region has not changed very much appreciably since our last meeting. The situation in Burundi continues to be serious and obviously does not lend itself, at present, to voluntary repatriation of refugees. Greater work is needed to de-escalate tension,

restore confidence, curb violence and restart dialogue with a view to finding a durable political solution to the conflict there. In the last few weeks there has been some positive movement but the country is far from stabilizing. It is of course our earnest hope that the encouraging trend witnessed is not a temporary phenomenon but rather an indication of a resolve on the part of the main political and other actors to make a decisive break from the path of irrationality, violence and self-destruction.

During the just-concluded Council of Ministers, the OAU made it quite clear that it feels and cares for Burundi. Our caring is manifested in our solidarity to the country and presence there within the framework of OMIB. At the same time, it was clearly indicated that our solidarity and caring should not be taken for granted. Neither should the patience of the international community. We therefore continue to urge the political forces of Burundi to take the challenge of dialogue seriously; and not to succumb to the temptations of extremist action which has paralysed government and the political process in the country. We continue to place emphasis on a political solution. At the same time it is important for the Burundi leadership both civilian and military not to underestimate the grave concern of Africa and the international community and their collective resolve to avert a catastrophe. The challenge is, therefore, before the Burundi leadership to demonstrate in word and deed that they are seriously and unequivocally committed to the path of genuine dialogue and reconciliation.

This is the path on which they can count on the active support and assistance of Africa and the international community.

In the case of Rwanda, there is hope and lately things have progressed making it possible for some voluntary repatriation of refugees from Tanzania, Zaire and Burundi. The measures taken by the Government of Rwanda need to be encouraged. Yet the number involved is still relatively small. What should be done is to continue creating a climate of confidence, security and stability in Rwanda, to consolidate an atmosphere which could encourage the return of refugees and to promote reconciliation including in particular the issue of justice.

We all recognize the central role that the issue of justice will play in any effort to resolve the refugee crisis in Rwanda. Yes, we can and should continue to urge the Government of Rwanda to strive to create the necessary conditions which will facilitate the return of the refugees in safety and dignity. At the same time, things would be made infinitely easier in terms of avoiding retribution and revenge killings, if the process of justice is quickened. Impunity must not be tolerated. This is why I believe that assisting and enhancing the capacity of the judicial institutions and procedures in Rwanda as well as reinvigorating the International Tribunal for Rwanda, are essential elements in our efforts to promote reconciliation in the country.

Linked to repatriation and reconciliation is the problem of resources, both for the maintenance of the refugees and alleviation of the burden on the countries of asylum. I continue to be preoccupied by the limited resource flow in spite of our clear knowledge that lack of adequate funding is undermining the capacity to care for the refugees as well as the ability of the receiving states to shoulder the burden of being hosts. This meeting therefore provides an opportunity to explore ways of mobilizing additional funding, for without it we cannot hope to resolve this problem as speedily as we may wish.

I recognize of course, the support that the region has received from the outside in the spirit of international solidarity and burden-sharing. In this respect, I should like to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the UNHCR, other United Nations Agencies as well as non-governmental organizations. With donor support all these agencies have provided life saving humanitarian assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons in the region. But even with this assistance which is still far short of the requirements, the prolonged stay of hundreds of thousands of refugees in camps is not a viable option. Our aim is to look ahead to the long term solutions of repatriation and resettlement, both to the internally displaced and those in refugee camps outside their countries.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all know that the refugee problems in the Great Lakes underlie serious difficulties of the region. It follows therefore that as we strive to find ways to deal with those problems, in terms, in particular, of convincing those in the camps to repatriate voluntarily, we should seek to help resolve the political issues which are at the heart of the humanitarian crisis we now face.

The politics of the region and the refugees problem, have a symbiotic relationship. Consequently, the process of addressing each of the two must proceed simultaneously. For we cannot hope to resolve the refugee crisis without addressing the political problems as we cannot have a lasting political solution without a comprehensive settlement of the refugee issue. This dual-track policy must be sustained and deepened.

In this dual-track policy which we must strengthen and expand, we should also seriously work for the implementation of decisions which will move the settlement process ahead. We have repeatedly agreed that the process of voluntary repatriation particularly with respect to Rwandese refugees, cannot significantly move forward unless the refugees in these camps are sorted out so that the bonafide ones are separated from the intimidatory armed elements and the political activists.

We have equally been in agreement that refugees even those willing to repatriate, will be hesitant to do so, unless the conditions permitting for their safe return and resettlement are assured in the countries of origin. We have also agreed that linking the two processes are the issues and financing and logistics. Why then despite this common understanding and the progress made in bringing about these necessary conditions, has the process of repatriation been so slow? Are there factors that we have perhaps overlooked? Are we missing any critical details or signals which we ought to be looking at?

As we attempt to answer these questions we should also endeavour to ensure that we coordinate our efforts and if possible work jointly. In so acting we shall avoid the risk of working at cross purposes while enhancing our efforts for maximum impact.

In the course of these consultations I hope we will also be able to address the important issue of follow-up mechanism. All too often we lament at the fact that we take decisions which are not followed through and which are not overseen. Given the presence of all of us, it is my fervent hope that we shall look at this issue critically and agree on a flexible yet workable framework within which we can exercise joint oversight of the implementation process of the Bujumbura Plan of Action.

The High Commissioner of UNHCR spoke last year of the steady erosion of the principle of asylum in the world. It is indeed preoccupying as we see in Africa as well, some tendencies of reversal in the tradition of hospitality. The receiving communities in particular, and Governments as well, are getting increasingly restless as the burdens of hosting these refugees are mounting. If this problem in the Great Lakes is allowed to linger much longer, it will not only breed conditions for perpetual insecurity and instability of the region, it will also do irreversible harm to the principle of asylum in the long run. If however we can speed up its resolution, we shall have created conditions for the return to enduring peace and stability as well as for the continued respect and consolidation of the principle, of asylum.

Let us work towards that objective.