



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU,
AT THE LAUNCHING OF THE COMESA FREE TRADE AREA**

LUSAKA, ZAMBIA

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I am honoured to be here today, taking part in this historic occasion of the launching of the COMESA Free Trade Area. The presence of so many Heads of State and Government as well as other dignitaries underscores the significance of this event. I wish in this regard, on behalf of the Organization of African Unity and on my own behalf, to congratulate the leadership and Member States of COMESA for this remarkable achievement. We have seen your Organization grow steadily from its origins as the Preferential Trade Area of Eastern and Southern African States in 1981 to its present status with an expanded membership. We applaud the tenacity and determination you have demonstrated in the Continental march towards stronger cooperation and integration.

COMESA is the first of our regional economic communities to launch a free trade area. This historic event indeed constitutes a giant step towards the realization of the objective of forging closer unity and solidarity among the African peoples. It is also a significant development in the implementation of the Sirte Declaration and the Lome Decision made by the African leaders on the establishment of the African Union. COMESA has indeed blazed the trail and demonstrated that the goals we are aspiring for can be achieved.

By the Sirte Declaration and the decision taken in Lome in July this year, on the African Union, African leaders have asserted the need for accelerating the measures that have to be taken in fostering closer cooperation and integration. In establishing a Free Trade Area, COMESA has entered into the second phase of implementing the Abuja Treaty and thus lived up to the vision of creating the African Union. I am confident that given the political will and sustained commitment that have been demonstrated during the first stage, COMESA Member States will overcome all obstacles and sustain the momentum of promoting closer cooperation and integration among African states.

Indeed, Africa has no option but to remain determined in creating and enhancing a framework for effective collective action. The pace of globalization compels us to act expeditiously and in a collective manner, so as to be able to harness its opportunities and avoid its impending threats. The resolve of African leaders to accelerate the implementation of the Abuja Treaty and to create the African Union is a major milestone in our quest to harness our collective efforts. I would like to express my appreciation to the 31 countries that have so far signed the Constitutive Act establishing the African Union and to those who have been able also to finalize the ratification process. I am confident that the remaining

countries will take the necessary steps for signing and ratifying the Act so as to enable the actual launching of the Union.

While acknowledging the significance of launching the Free Trade Area and giving credit to Member States of COMESA, it has to be stressed that this is but just a beginning, and that there is much still to be done to push ahead the process of integration in the continent. Attention will, of necessity have to be focused on surmounting some of the challenges that COMESA and other Regional Economic institutions taking similar initiatives have to face. These include paying due regard to the fact that the new arrangement has to operate within an international trading environment whose basic modalities are still being negotiated. In this context, there is a necessity for developing sufficient capacities for ensuring that the interests of Member States are protected in these negotiations. The experience derived in negotiating within the framework of the World Trade Organization, and with the European Union are quite pertinent.

Member States will have also to grapple with the reconciliation of short-term cost considerations with longer-term benefits of the FTA. It is a well-known fact that integration is not without cost, and that benefits from integration are neither immediate nor spread evenly among the participating Member States. What is not often emphasized is that, over time, all Member States tend to gain from integration, and that overall benefits will always outweigh the costs.

The issue of free movement of persons also needs to be addressed, in order to ensure that the Common Market is for the people, not only for goods and services. In this regard, the close involvement of all segments of the people of COMESA, in particular those in the private sector, will ensure that the integration process derives from, and is propelled by, the will of the people.

Underlying the ability to surmount the challenges and to achieve the desired objectives of economic integration is the prevalence of peace, security and stability in the continent as a whole. While efforts are still being deployed, the region is yet to experience total peace and tranquillity. The crises that prevail in some of the Member States, and sometimes between them, tend to impair the laudable efforts being made in enhancing economic cooperation. The OAU will continue to seek the means of promoting peace, security and stability so that we optimize the benefits of such initiatives as the Free Trade Area.

Reinvigorated efforts have to be equally deployed in the struggle to combat the HIV-AIDS pandemic. The COMESA region has been hit

severely by the pandemic, and unless urgent steps are taken to contain the spread of this killer disease, the benefits of economic integration will not be achieved.

I cannot conclude my remarks without paying tribute to the contribution of the Government and People of Zambia in the continental effort towards promoting peace, stability and security, and also in fostering cooperation and integration in our Continent. The hosting of COMESA since its inception and the rendering to it the necessary support that has led to the success we are celebrating today, once again reaffirms the total commitment of the Government and People of Zambia to the cause of Continental development. They reinforce the historical contribution that Zambia has made to the liberation of our Continent, and the important role that President Chiluba and his Government are playing in the search for peace in the region.

The OAU hails this important achievement by the Governments and peoples of the COMESA. Its historic significance need not be over-emphasized. To mark this auspicious occasion, I wish to present a shield to COMESA symbolizing our recognition of the important accomplishment that has been attained and our confidence of the future.

I thank you.