

**Message of the Secretary-General of the Organisation of African Unity,
Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
to the Assembly of Refugees Meeting
at the Palais Bourbon, Paris
16 June 2001**

This year's celebration of the Refugee Day is of special significance, for it is almost fifty years since the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Status of Refugees. More than being a legal exercise of codifying the rights of refugees, the adoption of the Convention was a most noble expression of the generosity and solidarity of the States of the world, in the face of the massive and tragic exodus of populations that had taken place as a consequence of the Second World War.

I commend the initiative taken by the French Government to bring refugees from all around the world to Paris, in this very Parliament House where the spirit of the French Revolution still endures, and whose ideals have become a common legacy of humanity.

The fundamental values of freedom, equality and fraternity, born of the French Revolution, are those which underpin our quest for the protection and dignity of the refugee. Since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees, the refugee situation has changed significantly and not for the better. The outpouring of generosity and compassion that marked the first years of the United Nations Convention has manifestly ebbed. In some countries of asylum, xenophobic sentiments have heightened, and restrictive measures have been introduced, seriously undermining the right of asylum and the sacrosanct institution of international protection.

Today, almost 20 million refugees all over the world are waging the battle for dignity and survival. The reasons that have driven them into exile are many and diverse: poverty, absence of democracy and tolerance, as well as bad governance, and above all, endless conflicts tearing our societies apart.

On 10 September 1969, the OAU adopted the Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. In so doing, our continental Organisation clearly demonstrated its determination to join the movement of solidarity generated by the adoption of the United Nations Convention. Two years ago, we celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the OAU Convention on Refugees in a particularly saddening context, compounded as it was by the proliferation of conflicts whose persistence and magnitude have greatly contributed to the perennial phenomenon of refugees.

The commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the UN Convention should afford us the opportunity to strengthen the universally recognized humanitarian principles enshrined in the Convention. I feel it is also opportune to encourage the International Community to galvanise its efforts

and energies, with a view to addressing resolutely, the situation of refugees throughout the world. I have no doubt that your gathering here in Paris will go a long way towards achieving this goal.

For its part, the OAU remains fully committed to the cause of refugees. It will leave no stone unturned in assuming its share of the responsibility in addressing the humanitarian challenges confronting us.

I wish you success in your deliberations.