

STATEMENT OF THE OAU SECRETARY GENERAL

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ON AFRICA REFUGEE DAY

JUNE 20, 1991

We are today 20th June 1991, marking Africa Refugee Day, commemorating the coming into force in 1974 of the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Problem of Refugees in Africa.

At present, the number of refugees on the continent is estimated at over five million; while the displaced persons are believed to be over twelve million. You are all aware of the present plight of refugees and displaced persons in countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Mozambique and Angola. Djibouti and Kenya have also been burdened with additional refugees fleeing from both Somalia and Ethiopia.

On this occasion, I would like to reiterate our solidarity and humanitarian concern for these and other unfortunate compatriots who have been

forced to flee their countries under painful circumstances which, in some cases, have threatened their lives.

The OAU along with its Member States has over the years been concentrating on the continuing search for durable solutions to the problem of refugees and displaced persons. The 26th Summit of the Heads of State and Government, in its solemn Declarations on both the Political and Socio-economic Situation in Africa as well as on the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World, stated our leaders' determination to make renewed efforts to eradicate the root causes of the problem of refugees and displaced persons. Additionally, Member States have generously offered asylum and hospitality to the refugees and displaced persons, in spite of their own acute economic and social constraints.

On this occasion, let me emphasize the fact that the problem of refugees in Africa is a reality and that the international community should abide by its commitment to the principle of burden-sharing and international solidarity as stipulated in the various international instruments on refugees.

While we express on this occasion our solidarity with the refugees and asylum countries,

we should also call for promoting durable solutions to this dehumanizing problem. I am, therefore, calling on countries of origin to declare general amnesty and enact amnesty laws so as to enable their citizens living in exile to voluntarily repatriate. OAU views voluntary repatriation as the most durable solution to the refugee problem on the continent.

Africa has earned the unfortunate and negative distinction of being a continent with the largest numbers of refugees and displaced persons. This is an image which Africa cannot be proud of. It is, therefore, time for Africa to take a hard look at this grave humanitarian problem and take urgent measures to address and confront the issues which have compelled millions of our brothers and sisters to opt for the miserable life of refugees.

As we commemorate the African Refugee Day, it is important to recall that nothing much will be achieved in solving Africa's refugee problem unless we Africans embrace the virtues of tolerance. We must learn to tolerate our different pigmentation, different cultural backgrounds and religious choices and different political points of view. Tolerance is not a weakness but a positive sign of maturity which will prevent our brothers and sisters from running into exile.

Finally, I would like to seize this opportunity to call upon the world community to provide relief or emergency and developmental assistance to Africa's refugees and displaced persons, and inputs to strengthen the fragile economies of the African countries most affected by the presence of refugees, returnees and displaced persons.

I thank you.