



Organization of African Unity

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***STATEMENT BY DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY
OF THE OAU FIRST MINISTERIAL
CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS***

GRAND BAY, MAURITIUS

15 APRIL, 1999

**Your Excellency Dr Navin Ramgoolan, Prime Minister
of the Republic of Mauritius,**

**Your Excellency Mr. R. Purrag, Deputy Prime Minister
and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Mauritius,**

Honorable Ministers,

**Mr. Youssoupha Ndiaye, Chairperson of
the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights,**

Mrs. Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,

FIRST MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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STATEMENT BY DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM

SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to welcome you all to this first ever OAU Ministerial Conference on human rights. The idea of a Ministerial Conference devoted to examining the human rights situation in Africa was proposed in 1996, by the Government of Angola. The proposal was endorsed by the Council of Ministers which met in Yaounde, Cameroon in July 1996. It was agreed to convene the Conference in Luanda in October 1998 and subsequently, the dates of 26-30 October 1998 were fixed. It was our hope that by convening the first Conference of African Ministers on Human rights in the month of October, we would have at the same time contributed at a continental level in the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Circumstances however did not allow the meeting to be held in Luanda in October last year as originally envisaged.

Allow me at this juncture to pay tribute to the Government of the Republic of Angola for this initiative, which was opportune then and is even more so today, taking into account the challenges facing us, at the dawn of the new millenium.

The fact that the Conference is held here today, at the invitation of the Government of Mauritius is particularly fitting. The efforts made by Mauritius in hosting this meeting are a clear testimony of their commitment to democracy and to the promotion and respect of human rights. It is part of their dedication to the larger cause of peace, security, stability and development in our continent. Indeed, the exemplary attachment of the people of this country to the principles of constitutional order, democracy and good governance provides for the participants of this conference a very propitious environment for meaningful deliberations.

I wish, therefore, to express my profound gratitude and thanks to the Government and the people of Mauritius for hosting this Ministerial Conference and for sparing no effort in ensuring that our stay on this beautiful island is pleasant and conducive to the attainment of the objectives of our meeting.

I am pleased to welcome Mrs. Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. I thank her for attending, in person, this meeting, thus demonstrating her support and that of her office, to the ongoing efforts in our continent aimed at promoting and strengthening a culture of human rights. We appreciate this support, which we situate in the context of the cooperation, partnership and complementarity, which we aim at building between the OAU and the United Nations. This cooperation is of particular relevance in the area of human rights which, as we all know, is a global and universal Agenda, though its implementation should naturally take into account the realities, conditions and historic background of each society. This should, in no way, affect our determination to work together towards the promotion of common principles based on shared values.

It is encouraging to note the seriousness with which African States have taken this meeting and which is reflected in the participation of many Ministers and other high ranking Government officials dealing with human rights in their respective countries. Indeed, as we were preparing for this Conference, we noted with satisfaction that there was a clear recognition of the importance of this encounter coming as it does at a crucial juncture in the history of our Continent.

We meet here today because we are conscious that Africa needs to review the situation of human rights in the continent. At the same time, this forum may also provide a relevant platform to address the criticism from within and outside the continent regarding the obvious violations of human rights. I believe that the time has come to make it clear that human rights constitute a whole range of fundamental attributes, which underlies individual and collective existence in society, in harmony and dignity. As the agenda of your meeting has underscored, apart from the God given attributes that emphasize the sanctity of life, human rights also include attributes that are in the political, social cultural, and economic domain. Indeed, the yearning for these rights is inherent in

every human being, young and old, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, employed and unemployed.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our meeting here today is the testimony of our conviction that observance of human rights is a critical factor in the creation of political environment in which the principles of democracy, good governance, accountability and constitutionalism are nurtured. By observing and protecting human rights, we are creating the necessary environment to our political, economic and social development, which will ensure that our people enjoy fully their rights.

As I stand here and look back, I must say that we have come along way in our struggle for the cause of human rights. Yet a lot still needs to be done, because in some of our countries today, we witness daily, violation of human rights.

The struggle for human rights is not new in our continent. Indeed, the struggle against colonialism and Apartheid was basically a struggle for human rights. As I have had the opportunity of stating on previous

occasions, I believe that the African peoples, who suffered the agony, humiliation, deprivation, and the indignity of slavery, colonialism and apartheid, have a vested interest in the promotion and respect of human rights.

Unfortunately, our people did not always enjoy the benefit of their struggle for freedom and dignity in the aftermath of independence. Moreover, our countries were not provided with adequate institutions to monitor, promote and protect human rights. The image of our continent was thus tarnished and Africa was perceived as a continent where there was no Rule of Law and where abuses and violations of human rights are the common and daily fate of our people.

Over the last years, the situation has been changing , slowly but steadily. Indeed, African governments have increasingly realized that the people could no longer be subjected to arbitrary practices, injustice and impunity. They also realized that the violation of human rights was a serious threat to national cohesion and constituted an impediment to socio-economic progress. At the same time, our people themselves have been rejecting dictatorship and authoritative practices, which lead to

violations of human rights. They have gradually but firmly been expressing their opposition to oppression and repression carried out in the name of maintaining unity and cohesion by undemocratic governments. I wish here to pay tribute to all Africans who have contributed to advancing the cause of human rights in Africa in conditions where they sometimes had to take risks and make sacrifices.

In the light of these new realities, our leaders have concentrated their collective efforts in bringing peace and stability, democracy and socio-economic development in the continent.

The process of change had a concrete manifestation when in 1981 in Nairobi, Kenya, the Heads of State and Government, pledging to achieve a better life for the people of Africa adopted the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. As a follow-up to this important decision, the African Commission was established in 1986 with its Headquarters in Banjul and has since then been active in promoting the cause of human rights in the continent. It has been working under difficult conditions, but it has managed to gain increasing credibility. I acknowledge the presence in our midst of Judge Youssouf N'Diaye, the

Chairperson of the Commission, and congratulate him and his colleagues for the efforts deployed and encourage them to persevere on that path.

Mention must be made of the efforts deployed by African governments to meet the aspirations of the people in the area of participatory democracy. Whatever the difficulties and obstacles, the progress made is encouraging. We must take pride in the process of democratization that is building up in our societies and in which most of the African States have embarked upon while recognizing that the road ahead is still bumpy. In order to overcome the shortcomings and obstacles that impede the democratization process, we should examine how we can nurture and promote the spirit of accommodation and mutual tolerance in our societies. We ought to go back and see how the African spirit of consensus can help us to engage in continuous dialogue and practice politics of inclusion in order to maintain cohesion among societies and avoid conflicts.

It is encouraging to witness the establishment of national human rights institutions which are allowed to operate albeit with limited resources and different degrees of independence. It is crucial that we

continue to build on these experiences and design better strategies for involving our people effectively in the formulation of decisions affecting their lives. This Conference affords an opportunity for exchanging views on our different experiences for promoting and respecting human rights where the Rule of Law is made to prevail.

One of the most recent achievements in Africa's endeavour to build institutions to sustain a culture of democracy and human rights has been the adoption, in June 1998, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, of the Protocol on the establishment of the African Court on Human and People's Rights. Furthermore, as part of the efforts aimed at promoting and protecting human rights, through the protection of the basic right for life, the OAU is currently engaged in a process aimed at preparing an OAU Convention on preventing and combating terrorism. The draft Convention will be submitted, for consideration and possible adoption, to the next session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government to be held in Algiers, Algeria, in July 1999.

Despite these efforts the situation of human rights in the continent remains a source of great concern. The list of our woes

continue to be unacceptably high and in some cases horrific. We continue to be haunted by the 1994 genocide in Rwanda whose fifth anniversary was commemorated earlier this month. There have been massacres in the Great Lakes Region and wanton killings and horrendous atrocities in Sierra Leone, to mention but a few examples. These massacres and killings have constituted a brutal violation of the first of the basic human rights – the right to life.

The terrible and disturbing phenomenon of the utilization of children as soldiers is rampant in many conflict situations. This has the effect of not only destroying the present but also future generations. And this goes on in total contravention of the fundamental rights contained in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child adopted in 1990.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Experience has demonstrated that quite often conflicts are a result of violations of human rights, and in conflict situations violations of human rights occur on a larger scale. In establishing the Mechanism for

Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, our continental Organization equipped itself with an instrument to deal with both causes and effects of human rights violations. In many ways, as we seek to prevent conflicts in our continent or resolve them when they occur, we endeavour to ensure the protection of human rights and thus promoting an environment for sustainable peace and stability.

Furthermore, broadly speaking, violation of human rights is still witnessed daily in many of our countries. This situation is unacceptable as no reason could justify the violation of the basic rights of the people. Clearly more efforts need to be exerted to address the current problems, which are quite complex and are of various dimensions, including political, socio-economic and of a legal nature.

Paramount efforts need to be undertaken in order to develop people's awareness of their rights since ultimately it is the people who should be the driving force for the promotion and respect of human rights. That is why, I believe that consideration should be given to integrating human rights education in the school curricula.

There is also need to build and strengthen institutions who are responsible for the promotion and respect of human rights to be able to play their role as watchdogs and strong pillars for the defense of human rights.

Above all there is the role of the leadership and office holders in our countries, who bear responsibility and are accountable for the situation of human rights. In this regard necessary attention should be given to the need for the law enforcement agencies and agents to be fully acquainted with and respectful of the law and practice relating to human rights provisions.

The challenge for human rights protection entails the collective action of governments, individuals, Non Governmental Organizations and civil society at large acting towards the same objective. It is, therefore, important that creative partnership or effective working relationship are established between governments and civil society. In this respect NGOS should not view governments as adversaries but rather as partners in pursuit of a common endeavour since all of them are expected to be acting towards the same objectives.

Similarly, governments ought to accept that NGOs and other sections of civil society are better placed to act as monitors on human rights abuses or in determining whether human rights standards are being met. NGOs are central to building awareness among the people and even within governments. It is precisely through interaction that it will be possible to implement an indigenous agenda for the Continent and challenge governments to implement it.

It is in recognition of this reality, that a Forum for African NGOs was convened in Nairobi, Kenya a few days ago with a view to affording them the opportunity to input some thematic recommendations into this Conference. I would like to thank the NGOs through their representatives who are present here, as observers, for the important contribution they continue to make to the protection of human and peoples' rights in Africa. The O.A.U will vigorously pursue the search for ways and means of effectively involving NGOs in particular and civil society in general in support of the activities of the Organization, because we believe that they have an important contribution to make in the search for solutions to the challenges facing our peoples at the dawn of the new millenium.

Excellencies, Ladies ad Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to underscore that it is imperative that we work together to face the challenges that confront the Continent. We must inculcate in our peoples a culture of peace, tolerance and respect for human rights. We must fight all the ills that make observance of human rights difficult, including bad governance, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs.

Similarly, we must energetically fight poverty, illiteracy and all manifestations of intolerance. We must practice politics of inclusion and build popularly based political processes that ensure the participation of our peoples in all aspects of governance and development. We must strive to overcome the scourge of conflicts, which has resulted in unbelievable pain and suffering. death and destruction in some of our countries. We must endeavour to make our Continent a place where human rights violations are not only condemned but also effectively opposed and eliminated. Only in doing so shall we as Africans be true and faithful to the struggle for freedom in our Continent. Our forefathers fought for freedom in order to ensure that the principles of liberty, equality, justice and dignity as well as the right to determine one's

destiny were observed. As we prepare to enter the new millenium, and in the immediate aftermath of the celebrations marking the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, let's recommit ourselves, as Africans, to promote and protect the human rights of our people so that no one could be harassed, victimized, imprisoned, tortured or killed because of his or her opinions, belief, color, sex or race in the years to come.

This meeting provides an opportunity for our Member States to recommit themselves to the cause of respecting and promoting human rights. We should also seize this opportunity to reaffirm that the respect of human rights is, indeed, an African agenda, because we believe that the life of an African is as precious as the life of any other human being. We realize that our continent can make progress, only if its people are in peace and enjoy security and tranquility. We also realize that we are part of the same world and humankind sharing common values and aspirations.

I thank you.