



Organization of African Unity

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

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

9 January 1995

**Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my pleasant duty to welcome you all to Africa Unity House. I wish of course to extend a special welcome to those who have come from their respective countries and headquarters to attend this important meeting.

We are meeting here today, in the first formal encounter of the preparatory committee of the Regional Conference on Assistance to Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in the Great Lakes Region. As you are all aware, the decision to convene the Conference was taken by the last Session of the OAU Council of Ministers in Tunis, Tunisia last year. This decision was subsequently adopted by the UN General Assembly.

This Preparatory Committee was established during our first meeting here in Addis Ababa on 9 September 1994 on the occasion of the Joint OAU/UNHCR Symposium to commemorate the Twenty-fifth and Twentieth Anniversaries of the adoption and entry into force of the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problems in Africa. At that first meeting, we engaged in a general exchange of views on the manner of proceeding with the convening of this important Conference.

Since then, there has been a series of informal consultations which have resulted in the meeting of this Preparatory Committee today.

You are all no doubt aware of what is at stake as well as the importance of the envisaged Conference on Assistance to Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in the Great Lakes Region. The issue of refugees, returnees and displaced persons is at the very core of concerns over peace, security and stability in that region. We are all familiar with the series of traumatic events that the people of Burundi and Rwanda have traversed in the recent past which have given rise to mass movements of populations and the inherent scourges in terms of human suffering, exile and deprivation. You are equally familiar with the huge burden being shouldered by the neighboring countries which have had to provide asylum for hundreds of thousands of refugees from Rwanda and Burundi.

The recent tragedies that have occurred in these two countries have provided further impetus to the need for a regional encounter to address the issue of refugees, returnees and displaced persons in the Great Lakes Region, within the overall framework of promoting peace, security and stability in that region. Clearly, the Conference that is envisaged should come out with concrete measures with regard to the assistance to be extended to the refugees, returnees and displaced persons both in Rwanda and Burundi and in the neighboring countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since this is a Preparatory Meeting, I would like to conclude my remarks by emphasizing the time-factor and observing that time is not on our side. Between now and not later than the first week of February, all arrangements have to be finalized for the convening of the Conference. I am aware of the commitment of the members of this Preparatory

Committee to proceed speedily and expeditiously as you all realize the importance and urgency of the envisaged Conference. I am therefore confident that your Committee will be able to meet our targets provided the necessary financial support is secured in good time. In this connection, I count on the commitment of the donor countries in support of this important and collective endeavor which aims at sustaining a humanitarian course and pursuing the objective of peace, security and stability in the Great Lakes Region. The Committee therefore has to face up to a unique responsibility in easing the success of the Conference.

At this juncture I wish to express my profound gratitude and that of the OAU to the countries of asylum which have sacrificed and continue to sacrifice so much in order to give refuge to our brothers and sisters from Rwanda and Burundi. I also want to thank all the donor countries, the UNHCR, UN Agencies and voluntary organizations for the support they have provided and continue to provide to the countries of the Great Lakes Region in terms of assistance to refugees, returnees and displaced persons. I count on their continued commitment and support.

I cannot conclude my remarks without mentioning the important initiative which has been taken by the leaders of the region aimed at contributing to the Rwandese Refugee crisis. Here I am referring to the Summit which was held in Nairobi last Saturday, January 7th, under the Chairmanship of President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya with the participation of the Presidents of Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia and the Prime Minister of Zaire. That Summit which focused on how to create safe zones within Rwanda so as to facilitate the return of the Rwandese refugees from Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi, is certainly an important initiative. I am sure that in the course of this meeting we shall be given further information on the outcome of the Summit by the representatives of the countries concerned here present. Suffice it for me to point out that the very convening of the meeting signifies the concern felt and the importance attached by the leaders of the region to this burning issue. I believe that the discussions in Nairobi will constitute an important input to the forthcoming Regional Conference on Refugees which our session here today will be preparing for.