



ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY

**REGIONAL MEETING ON REFUGEES IN
THE GREAT LAKES REGION
KAMPALA, UGANDA : 8-9 MAY 1998**

**Statement of H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim
Secretary General of the OAU**

**Kampala, Uganda
8 May 1998**

**Mme Sadako Ogata,
The United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees and
Co-Chair of this Meeting,**

**Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Allow me to welcome H.E. President Yoweri Museveni to this meeting and to thank him for accepting to open this regional meeting on refugee issues in the Great Lakes region. His presence amongst us underscores the importance that he, personally, and the leaders of the Great Lakes attach to the problems of refugees in the region and indeed, to the urgency of finding durable and lasting solutions to this problem. I wish also to welcome the Ministers and other delegates from the countries of the region and thank them most sincerely for having responded favourably to our invitation.

This regional meeting marks yet another effort by the OAU and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees together with the countries of origin and those of asylum to tackle one of the longest and most complex refugee situations the continent has been confronted with in recent history. This situation reached dramatic proportions, especially between April and June 1994 and again between 1996 and 1997. In 1994, thousands of Rwandese left their country in the largest exodus in recent memory. Included in the exodus were many who bore arms and crossed their national frontiers into

neighbouring countries. But among these refugees, there were thousands of those who belonged to the former Rwandese army as well as the Interahamwe militia who in a short period of three months had massacred over 800,000 fellow Rwandese, mainly of the Tutsi ethnic group.

This armed elements soon regrouped and re-organized under their political leadership and continued to launch military attacks on their country of origin. Bona fide refugees were held hostage, intimidated and threatened and even killed when they expressed the wish to return home. Humanitarian personnel were also threatened and humanitarian assistance impounded by the former military establishment to support their subversive activities.

In an attempt to address this complex situation, several meetings were convened either by the OAU or the UNHCR or jointly together with others and including the countries of origin and those of asylum. I recall the first of such meetings held in Addis Ababa on 20 September 1994 soon after the genocide in Rwanda which Mme Ogata and I co-chaired. Subsequently, several other meetings were held on the same issue, including the Nairobi Regional Summit in January 1995, the Bujumbura International Conference in February 1995, and the Addis Ababa meeting in September 1995. All these meetings recognized the danger that the presence of armed refugees in the refugee camps posed to the security of the countries of origin and of the asylum countries. The participants to these meetings supported efforts aimed at disarming the armed refugees and relocating them elsewhere.

The already complex refugee situation in the region was thus gravely compounded by the phenomenon of "armed refugees". This has generated considerable confusion and misunderstanding within the international community with respect to the implementation of humanitarian and refugee protection principles on the one hand and the legitimate security concerns of the countries concerned, particularly the countries of origin and those of asylum on the other.

While the world responded well to the refugee crisis in the region with an outpouring of aid, the problem was, however, that the camps were controlled by the very people who ordered or executed the killings of thousands of their compatriots. Instead of being put on trial, these so-called refugees found themselves under the protection of the international community in total disregard of the relevant provisions of international Convention on refugees, particularly the OAU refugee Convention which recognizes the need "to make a distinction between a refugee who seeks a peaceful and normal life and a person fleeing his country for the sole purpose of fomenting subversive activities from outside".

In 1996/97, the protection regime was over-stretched when the armed campaign against the regime of the late President Mobutu engulfed the refugee camps. Many of the refugee camps were viewed as bastions of insecurity as evidenced by the many within the camps who bore arms. Here again, there has not always been strict observance of the cardinal humanitarian principles as

security and political consideration which were paramount, contributed in seriously undermining the respect for these principles.

In their joint efforts to stem the tide, the leaders of the region held a number of Summit meetings. You would recall that the Nairobi I Summit had requested the United Nations Secretary General to launch an operation to ensure the disarming and separation of the armed refugees. This request was unfortunately not followed up by the United Nations. Indeed, the mandate of the multinational force established by the United Nations Security Council did not include the disarming and separation of the armed refugees. Besides, the Security Council decision to deploy a multinational came too late as thousands of refugees mainly from Rwanda headed home in reverse order reminiscent of the 1994 exodus into exile. Again, issues of protection came to the fore. The decision of the Rwandese government to allow the refugees to return with minimum procedural measures facilitated return of the thousands of refugees. However, many others remained in former Zaire and their fate constituted a source of great concern to the international community.

Now that most of the refugees have returned home, especially in the case of Rwanda, the time has come for us all to work towards enhancing mutual understanding and restoring confidence in order to enable the UNHCR, the OAU and indeed, the countries of origin and those of asylum to address comprehensively whatever remains of the refugee problem and to be able to tackle any future refugee phenomenon in the region and, more importantly, to prevent another humanitarian tragedy.

It is our view, at the OAU, that the proper application of humanitarian principles, especially international refugee law as contained in the 1951 UN Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as the 1969 OAU Convention is not contradictory to the pursuit of legitimate security concerns and other state interests but rather can contribute to peace and stability and thus ensure international assistance and support for both countries of origin and those of asylum.

At this meeting, therefore, it is important for all of us to reaffirm our commitment to the basic humanitarian principles and a strict adherence to these principles. This meeting also provides us a unique opportunity to review the situation of refugees in the region and to exchange views on how best to address the various aspects of the problem, including the issue of the return, rehabilitation and reintegration of the returnees and displaced persons. It should also afford us the chance to reflect together on how to ensure that the refugee problem should no longer be a source of insecurity and instability in the region.

I hope that we shall leave Kampala with a common understanding of the need to respect the humanitarian principles to which all our Member States are committed, and the legitimate state security concerns which our partners from the UNHCR must acknowledge, understand and appreciate vis-a-vis humanitarian principles. I have, on several occasions, pointed out that while the UNHCR should be able to implement its international mandate to protect and assist the refugees with the full cooperation of countries concerned, the

legitimate political and security concerns of both countries of origin and those of asylum deserved proper consideration.

We need to make a new beginning in Kampala. We can only do this by re-establishing dialogue. That is why, we at the OAU, have been working with the countries of the region and UNHCR towards achieving this objective and I have been personally very supportive of all efforts aimed at renewing dialogue between all concerned. I am therefore pleased that this informal meeting is taking place at this most auspicious venue of Kampala and under the able guidance of President Museveni. I am confident that we shall all together be able to draw lessons from the tragic experiences in the Great Lakes Region, from the achievements and also from the mistakes committed. I have no doubt that we are all guided by the same commitment to the refugee protection principles in conformity with the relevant international and OAU Conventions on the assistance to refugees and displaced persons. We also all agree that the refugee problem should not be allowed to create misunderstanding and mistrust among the countries of the region.

I sincerely hope that our today's meeting shall be the beginning of a new era of constructive dialogue and consultations on the issues of refugees and displaced persons so that in joining our efforts, we should be able to effectively discharge our responsibilities towards those of our brothers and sisters in need and towards assisting the countries of the region to build ahead with a new partnership based on cooperation and solidarity. In this endeavour, I wish to

express the full disposition of the OAU and my personal commitment to promote such a partnership.

I thank you.