



Organization of African Unity

**Address By Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
Secretary General of the OAU at the
World Understanding Day Lunch, Organized
By the Rotary Club of Nairobi
23rd March, 2000**

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Mr. Chairman, Rotarian Dinesh Kapila,
Excellencies Ambassadors and Heads of Mission,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to express my appreciation to the Rotary Club of Nairobi for inviting me to this occasion of celebrating the World Understanding Day, and for making it possible for me to share with you some insights on the issues of peace and stability in Africa.

I would like to pay special tribute to the Rotarians of Africa, and specifically those of Nairobi for the important work you have been performing among the communities. Your endeavour to improve the basic welfare and living conditions of people in need, is indeed laudable. Your spirit of philanthropy, your developmental initiatives, and as your motto underlines, your dedication to – **service above self** – is what makes your movement transcend the quality of simply being an Organization, into a living philosophy. Above all, your quest to promote friendship and understanding between men and women of different categories has an impact that touches on the very fabric of our societies.

On the occasion of celebrating this particular day, I have chosen to speak on the theme of **Peace and Stability** in order to underline the critical importance of these conditions in the promotion of understanding in our Continent. There is indeed a strong symbiotic linkage between peace, stability and understanding. Wherever there is no peace and stability definitely there cannot be understanding, and where understanding is lacking, peace and stability cannot thrive. Clearly, as we enter the new century and the new millennium, the need to ensure the convergence of these conditions is among Africa's top priorities.

The experience of the people of this Continent in the past two decades, has exposed so vividly the consequences of negating understanding in society, thus making evident the importance of promoting peace and stability. One needs only to look around and see what is going on with the destruction, carnage and mayhem in the different parts of our Continent. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost due to conflicts, precious assets and infrastructure have been destroyed. Millions have been compelled to vote with their feet and thus become refugees in other countries. Millions more have been forced to move from their habitat of choice and to be displaced in strange localities within their countries. At a time when the Continent is in dire need of accelerated development, its efforts are being severely undermined by the scourge of conflicts and instability.

Conflicts have inflicted heavy social costs. They leave in their wake mutilated societies and people. They produce legacies of increased discord within nations and disrupt ordered life and

civilizations. More disturbing is that in some of the incidences where peace has broken down, we have begun to observe a proliferation of antagonism appearing in the form of ethnicity, religion, and regionalism. Much as these incidences remain relatively few, their impact is however devastating because they have a terrible adverse effect on the totality of communities and societies.

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa has characterized this century as AFRICA'S Century. Indeed, this is a vision that we all share. Certainly, the African people aspire for the realization of this objective. But in order to achieve this, we must create the conditions that can enable us attain the vision. And for doing so, we need to position our Continent in a manner that ensures that we are able to overcome the vagaries and challenges that could undermine our efforts towards that objective.

An important condition in this regard, is the promotion of sustainable peace and stability throughout the Continent. It was towards this end, that at the 1999 OAU Summit held in Algiers, following the recommendation of President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, African leaders decided to designate the year 2000 as a year of Peace. Of course, this decision does not mean that we are going to end all conflicts and all hostilities during this one year, desirable as that may be. What it means however is that we have committed ourselves, at the very least, to create the conditions for peace to thrive at all levels of our societies. It is a determination to eradicate the factors that contribute to the generation of conflicts and misunderstanding among our people.

Experience has clearly demonstrated that peace is not simply the absence of war or conflict, though this is critical. It involves also the prevalence of conditions that allow people to live without fear of real or perceived persecution. It entails providing a space for every individual and every community to enjoy a sense of belonging in society and to have the equal opportunity of contributing towards shaping the society's destiny.

The challenge of promoting peace in the Continent, therefore, goes beyond the containment, management and resolution of conflicts and wars. It embraces a decisive and systematic elimination of the conditions that provoke the occurrence of tensions and conflicts, and which undermine the prevalence of harmony and understanding. These conditions include the building of institutions of democratic governance, promoting the rule of law, and the respect of the totality of human rights.

This is the basic challenge that confronts Africa at the dawn of the new millennium. The way in which we respond to this challenge will determine the ultimate future of our Continent and the legacy that we bequeath to the future generations.

During the past decade, African countries have embarked on a process of creating these institutions and providing for their effective functioning. The task is quite daunting and challenging, particularly bearing in mind the legacy of our history. However, it is not an

insurmountable task, and for peace and stability to flourish, it has to be accomplished.

The need for the promotion of a culture of tolerance and accommodation is equally paramount in our endeavour to foster peace and understanding among our people. We must fight against intolerance and extremism, be it in its political, religious, colour, ethnic or regional manifestation. Our Continent is made up of a mosaic of cultures, traditions and belief systems, which constitute a dynamic strength for development if properly deployed. It is only through dialogue and accommodation can this potential be effectively harnessed. In any case, we must consider our diversity as a source of strength rather than division.

The scourge of corruption is another social ill which has fuelled discord and tension in our midst. It has fostered distortions in public systems and encouraged inequities in accessing services. In fact, corruption has created difficulties for the poor to enjoy their basic rights. Indeed, corruption threatens to destroy the very fabric of our societies. Vigorous efforts have to be deployed to eliminate this scourge which in some places has destroyed the credibility of important institutions and processes.

Apart from the efforts being deployed at the national and regional levels to establish conditions that are conducive for the promotion of peace and stability and for dealing with situations of conflict, African leaders, through the Continental Organization, the OAU, have taken bold and resolute measures aimed at enhancing

the effectiveness of these efforts. The establishment of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in 1993 has been a major milestone in the collective endeavour to deal with the breakdown of peace within and between our Member States. Since its establishment, the Mechanism has been deployed in dealing with various conflict situations. Similarly, the establishment of the Commission for Peoples and Human Rights, as well as the various conventions that African countries have ratified, demonstrate a commitment to put in place the right conditions for the prevalence of peace in our Continent.

Equally so, at the Algiers Summit of 1999, Heads of State and Government, in their determination to promote strong and democratic institutions that will safeguard the principles of good governance, transparency, accountability and human rights, adopted a decision of great significance for the future of our Continent. They gave an ultimatum to Member States whose Governments came to power through unconstitutional means after the Harare Summit of 1997, to restore constitutional legality before the next Summit. Much as it may be too early to assess the impact of this decision, developments during the past eight months give indications which portend a new disposition towards the phenomenon of constitutionalism in the Continent. Africa's and world reaction to the Christmas Eve Coup d'état in Côte d'Ivoire confirm this positive disposition.

It is an incontestable fact that notwithstanding all the efforts deployed by African States and the international community at large, conflicts still prevail, torment and traumatize our Continent. Yet, the

remarkable thing is that it is African leaders and officials who are now in the forefront in efforts to end this scourge. Put succinctly, we no longer simply lament about conflicts or provide excuses for them. We are determined to act in concert and with persistence to overcome this awesome challenge. This determination is not confined to governments. It involves non-governmental organizations and the civil society at large.

Right here in Kenya, the efforts of President Moi as the Chairman of the IGAD initiative on Sudan to resolve the conflict in that country and also his contribution towards bringing to an end the crisis in Somalia illustrate the commitment of the Continent towards seeking peace. Similarly, the initiative of President Guelleh of Djibouti which has given a new impetus to finding a lasting solution to the Somali problem ascertain the untiring determination of Africa's leaders.

The conflict in the DRC and the tragedy in Sierra Leone have preoccupied the attention and involvement of a number of our leaders, our Governments and our peoples. One can go on enumerating more of such undertakings that have been made in search of peace and stability in our Continent.

I wish to reiterate an observation I made earlier that peace is not simply the absence of conflict. For the African Continent, the attainment of peace and stability is also inextricably linked to combating abject poverty. For as long as poverty prevails, it will remain the most destabilizing factor for our people. Indeed, as the

saying goes, there cannot be durable peace without sustainable development, nor can there be development without peace. It is therefore necessary to struggle for economic development so that a stronger foundation of prosperity and dynamism can be established and that our Continent takes its rightful position in this era of globalization.

Yet the challenge of building a culture of peace must go beyond governments. A democratic political culture, traditions of tolerance, dialogue and understanding must be nurtured and consolidated at the level of the people. It is in this respect that civil and community institutions have an important role to play in promoting the values of peace and understanding.

For us in Africa, we remain steadfast in our resolve to develop a Continent which is free from conflict and tension, and whose societal foundation is based on peace, stability and understanding. Collectively, we can achieve this vision. We cannot afford to fail and together, we cannot fail.

I thank you.