



Organization of African Unity

**Statement by H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim
Secretary General of the Organization of
African Unity (OAU) to the Seventh
General Assembly of All Africa
Conference of Churches**

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

9 October, 1997

**Your Excellency, Most Reverend Archbishop Desmond Tutu
President of the all Africa Conference of Churches,**

**Your Holiness Abune Paulos
Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,**

**Reverend Yadesa Daba, President of the Ethiopian
Evangelical Church, Mekane Eyesus,**

**Reverend Jose Chipenda, General Secretary
All Africa Conference of Churches,**

Your Eminence,

Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish, from the outset, on behalf of the General Secretariat of the Organisation of African Unity and on my own behalf, to welcome all the participants to this 7th General Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches. We are, indeed, very pleased that this important Conference is being held in Addis Ababa, the Headquarters of our continental Organisation. I wish also to thank the organisers of the Conference for the arrangements they have put in place for the Conference and for the opportunity they have afforded me to address this august Assembly. I would like, in particular, to pay special tribute

to His Holiness Abune Paulos, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the most Reverend Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President of the All Africa Conference of Churches for their untiring efforts, for their ecumenical leadership and contribution, and for their dedication to the cause of humanity.

We at the OAU have every reason to appreciate the theme of the Conference: **Troubled, but not Destroyed**. Indeed, this has been our *leitmotiv* over the last years during which our continent has been going through moments of trial and tribulation and has been confronted with monumental challenges. Yes, our continent has been troubled. Poverty, illiteracy, diseases, war, civil strifes and environmental degradation have been the daily reality of a lot of our fellow Africans. Yes, our continent is often perceived as a continent in perpetual crisis, a continent of misery, deprivation, mismanagement and violation of human rights and a continent where corruption is endemic. Clearly, however, this totally negative image is misplaced. For, despite their problems, the African peoples have demonstrated their tremendous resilience. They have shown admirable example of a people struggling for survival, a people with a strong faith in life.

Furthermore, today, our African countries and our people are increasingly showing determination to build a better future and discard the stereo-type image of a continent without hope.

Over the last years, Africa has embarked on profound socio-economic and political reforms and programmes aimed at helping our countries to take their rightful place and play their rightful role in the new and highly competitive world. In this context, most of our countries have put in place macro-economic frameworks to ensure sustainability of economic growth and development. At continental level, our countries have decided to pursue with renewed vigour and determination the path of economic cooperation and integration within the framework of the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community.

While socio-economic development and progress is our fundamental objective in the continent, we are conscious of the fact that no meaningful economic development can be achieved in an environment devoid of peace, security and stability. That is why our continental Organisation and our individual African countries have placed particular emphasis, over the last years, on the imperative need to address the scourge of conflicts in Africa.

Considerable efforts are being deployed both by Africans and in tandem with other partners from the international community to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts with their attendant human tragedies and destructions. At the same time, necessary attention is given to the promotion of democracy and human rights in the continent and to issues related to the participation of the peoples in socio-economic and political endeavours. In this respect, the role and contribution of women has received greater recognition. Gender issues have been brought to the mainstream of socio-economic planning and development in most of our countries. I am glad that this issue was given due consideration by this Assembly. Indeed, we have been encouraged by the opportunity afforded to a woman to deliver a keynote speech to this august Assembly which is a reflection of the growing recognition the Church is according women as indispensable partners in socio-economic development. I wish to congratulate the Churches for their recognition of women's contribution through the "decade of Churches solidarity with the women".

In parallel to its efforts at forging peace, the OAU is also encouraging inter-African and international cooperation to combat pandemic diseases afflicting our peoples as well as addressing social plights, particularly those affecting our youth.

In all these endeavours, we see the Church as an important partner. Indeed, with its immense moral and spiritual authority, the Church is well placed to play a major role in inculcating a spirit of understanding and tolerance among our peoples and countries. The Church is a powerful force for peace as peace is at the core of its ecclesiastic message. The Church also preaches justice and we all know that we cannot separate justice from peace. The Church stands for and defends human dignity and is against violation of basic human rights which are often a source of conflicts and disputes between and among communities. The Church is against racial discrimination and oppression which have been the cause of many human tragedies. The position of the Church in defence of human dignity and human equality was highly demonstrated by the role played by Archbishop Desmond Tutu during the struggle against the Apartheid Regime in South Africa. It is, therefore, refreshing to have him amongst us here today and to recognize his immense contribution to the cause of human dignity. We should draw inspiration from this heroic stance of the Archbishop to promote the role of the Church as an instrument for building peace and understanding in our continent.

We are aware and indeed, very appreciative of the various peace initiatives undertaken by the Church in many areas of conflict in the continent. They might have been some instances where some individual members of the clergy have not been strong enough to resist the temptation of taking sides in ethnic conflicts or they have remained silent in the face of massacres and genocide. These isolated incidents should, however, not be allowed to undermine the important role of the Church in the promotion of peace and justice in Africa.

In our continent which is known for its diversities both in terms of ethnicity and religion, the role of religious leaders is fundamental in enhancing a culture of peace and tolerance which is key in sustaining peace and understanding among and within our communities. I wish, therefore, to seize the opportunity to urge religious leaders of all faiths to strive even harder for the promotion of understanding and cooperation among all our peoples and stand firmly against any extremism which can only cause suffering, bitterness and division in our societies.

Your Most Reverend Archbishop, the President

of the Assembly;

Eminence;

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;

This 7th Session of the General Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches is being held in very particular circumstances at a time when we are about to enter the new millennium. This is the time when Africa like the other continents is preparing itself to meet the next millennium in better conditions. This is, therefore, the time for hope and expectations. For our continent and our people it is also an opportune time for reflection and critical self-analysis so that we may learn from the mistakes and shortcomings of the past and prepare ourselves adequately to confront the challenges and make effective use of the opportunities of the new millennium. I have already stated that the stereo-type image of our continent as being one in perpetual crisis is wrong.

Africa is changing and doing so by and large for the better. Despite formidable odds and adversity our people's resilience has prevailed. But even as we recognize that as a continent in transition there are about to be difficulties and

crises, we must accept that some of the crises that we have endured are of our own making and must therefore resolve to seriously overcome them and of no less importance avoid their recurrence. In this exercise, we must have the courage to ask ourselves some very pertinent questions. Ours is a continent endowed with tremendous resources both human and material. Yet, the vast majority of our people live in abject poverty and deprivation. Why this blatant contradiction ? Africa is a continent which throughout history has suffered from massive violations of human rights - from slavery to colonialism and more recently racial discrimination and apartheid. It is therefore only right and proper that free Africa should be in the forefront in the fight for the defence of human rights. And institutionally we have done the right things. All our countries are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights whose 50th Anniversary we shall be celebrating next year. In addition, our countries are also parties to the African Charter of Human and People's Rights. Yet despite this, violations of human rights in some cases on a massive scale, continue to take place in some parts of our continent. And how can we explain the manifestation of such brutal

intolerance as we witnessed in the massacre and genocide in Rwanda three years ago which led to the decimation of hundreds of thousands of our fellow human beings and whose serious and negative repercussions are still with us today in the Great Lakes Region ?

As Africans we have the duty and responsibility to address these and other relevant questions. And undoubtedly, in an Assembly of this nature which brings together eminent men and women of religion, such questions are especially relevant.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has often been said and not without reason, that Africa is the continent of the future. But to ensure the future prosperity of our people, we must address the problems and crises of today. A new Africa is emerging. Yet we have a long way to go. As we prepare ourselves for the new millennium, let us redouble our efforts at ending conflicts and stop our continent being turned into killing fields. Peace is the single most important demand of our people. Political leaders alone cannot achieve this. Africans of all persuasions must raise their voices in unison