



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU TO THE 71ST
ORDINARY SESSION OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS**

**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
March 8, 2000**

Mr. Chairman,

**Your Excellency Ato Meles Zenawi, the Prime Minister
of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,**

Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegation,

**Distinguished Executive Secretary of the United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa, Mr. K.Y. Amoako,**

**Distinguished Assistant Secretary General, Department
of Political Affairs of the United Nations, Mr. Ibrahima Fall,**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to this 71st Session of the Council of Ministers of our Continental Organization. I wish to express my profound gratitude to Ato Meles Zenawi, the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia for gracing this occasion with his presence. Your presence here with us, Mr. Prime Minister, is once again a demonstration of the seriousness that you and your colleagues, Heads of State and Government, attach to the work of our Continental Organization. Your inspiring address will certainly enrich the deliberations of Council.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the outgoing Chairman of Council, Hon. Youcef Yousfi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, and his distinguished predecessor in office, Mr. Ahmed Attaf, for their important role in the conduct of the affairs of our Organization.

This is the first Council Session in this new century. It is therefore an appropriate occasion for reflection and charting the way forward in the further pursuit of our collective agenda. It is a happy coincidence that we are beginning this Session of Council on the occasion of the International Women's Day. I therefore wish at the very outset to salute the women of our Continent who have made such a gigantic contribution in Africa's struggle for liberation and social and economic emancipation. It is thus fitting on this particular occasion to underscore the cardinal importance of the contribution of women in our comprehensive agenda. It is equally fitting that we must use the occasion to reaffirm the Continent's determination to ensure the full liberation of the African woman from the antiquated vestiges of discrimination and injustice. Above all, we must reaffirm the crucial and urgent importance of the full empowerment of the women of our Continent in all spheres of our societies and, especially in the area of governance. Only by doing so, can the full potential of the Continent be utilized to face the challenges of the new century.

I wish to share with Council, my concern over the poor state of the financial situation of our Organization. In a development which has considerably reversed the progress we made in the past few years, the level of cumulative arrears for our budget has increased substantially and the trend towards delayed payments seems unfortunately, to persist. In this respect, while we are now in the eighth month of the current financial year, hardly a third of the Member States have paid their assessed contributions in full as the report of the Committee of Ambassadors has shown.

I am acutely aware of the current economic difficulties experienced by Member States. But I also believe that an important aspect of overcoming our difficulties is to consolidate our respective strengths and to enhance our collective actions. The position of this Organization, in terms of what it stands for and what it aspires to achieve represents that strength and collectivity. In fact, this is all the more critical now in view of the challenges of globalization and in the light of the multiple agenda for peace, cooperation and development that we have defined for ourselves. I would, therefore, appeal to Council to address the issue of the financial resources at the disposal of the Organization with a sense of urgency.

To a large extent, the process of renewing our Organization and re-dynamizing it through the Restructuring Exercise that we have embarked upon, will go a long way towards creating the new OAU that is both responsive to the demands of its Member States and one that is able to establish its continued relevance to the vast majority of the peoples of this Continent. I wish to express my appreciation for the support and cooperation that I am receiving from Member States, the staff of the General Secretariat and our external partners in ensuring the success of this exercise.

Despite the prevailing resource constraints, it is gratifying to note that the overall performance of the Organization as a whole during the period under review has been encouraging. In the area of promoting peace, security and stability for example, while it is sadly true that the scourge of conflicts continue to haunt the Continent, it is equally an established fact that the engagement of the OAU and regional Organizations along with the laudable initiatives undertaken

by various leaders, in dealing with different conflict situations give us reason for optimism.

Cases in point include the crucial and sustained efforts of the leaders of the region coordinated by President Chiluba of Zambia to ensure that the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement in the DRC is implemented; the significant role played by President Bongo of Gabon culminating in the Agreement on a Ceasefire and cessation of hostilities in the Republic of Congo; the continuation of the IGAD initiative under the leadership of President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya aimed at ending the conflict in Southern Sudan; the initiative of the current Chairman of IGAD, President Guelleh of Djibouti aimed at ending the conflict in Somalia; the vital role of the ECOWAS leaders now coordinated by its current Chairman, President Konare of Mali to ensure the implementation of the Lome Agreement and thus achieve normalcy in Sierra Leone; the facilitation role of President Nelson Mandela in search of a durable and just peace in Burundi as well as the persistent and intensified efforts of the current Chairman of the OAU, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria, working in concert with the Secretary General aimed at ending the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

At the Algiers Summit, following the recommendation of President Obasanjo of Nigeria, African leaders decided to designate the year 2000 as a year of Peace. The peace efforts I have adumbrated aptly correspond to the exhortations of the Algiers Assembly. Indeed, during the past eight months since Algiers, there has been an intensification of efforts among our leaders, our Continental Organization, and the civil society in general, aimed at

ensuring the realization of the aspiration of establishing the foundation for permanent peace in Africa.

It is self-evident that the search for peace in our Continent should not be limited to focusing predominantly on the phenomenon of conflict. The search must be all-embracing so as to encompass the building of institutions of democratic governance, and equally critical, the promotion of a culture of tolerance and accommodation. The diversity among the African peoples, be it at the level of ethnicity, religion, colour, or regionalism needs to be harnessed into a dynamic strength for development rather than allowed to become a liability and a fetter to our prosperity. Indeed, in order to achieve a conflict free Continent, we must inculcate and strengthen the culture of tolerance and dialogue in our societies. And with equal vehemence we must fight against extremism of all forms.

We do realize that the struggle in combating the acute poverty among the people of Africa and of being active participants in the implementation of the global agenda for peace and development can only succeed if we consolidate our collective endeavours. In fact, Africa's strength and our ability to obviate the threat of further marginalization, depend on the building of solidarity among our peoples and the strengthening of the bonds of unity. In Sirte, our leaders pronounced their resolve to establish the African Union and to accelerate the establishment of the institutions of African Economic Community. I believe that the adoption of the Sirte Declaration has brought closer the vision of the founding fathers of our Organization and the desire of the African peoples for closer cooperation, integration and unity. We in the General Secretariat

have taken up the challenge of implementation with full commitment and devotion. We shall endeavour to maintain the spirit that was demonstrated by our leaders at Sirte.

It should be emphasized nevertheless, that the overall task of realizing the African Union and other Sirte Decisions is a collective undertaking involving all sectors of our societies and particularly, our governments who have the arduous task of creating a propitious environment for the achievement of the mandate of Sirte.

Before concluding, allow me to refer to two specific issues which call for urgent attention of this Council and indeed the attention of our governments and peoples as a whole. These are the HIV-AIDS pandemic and the natural disasters.

During the past twenty years, AIDS has been the single, most indiscriminate and devastating killer of the largest number of African people. More people have died from this illness than those who have died from the total number of conflicts in the continent during the past two decades.

Some of our countries have confronted this problem in an open and transparent manner, while in some, we are yet to see the emergence of openness and attitudes that will allow for the mobilization of the population and resources to deal with the problem in an effective manner. The terrible consequences of this pandemic are multi-faceted and I need not elaborate on them here.

I wish therefore to appeal to our Member States in the strongest possible manner, to pay particular attention to this tragic scourge in our countries. We should begin to act concretely and openly to put in place the necessary measures at the family, local, national and continental levels, to stop this pandemic from wrecking further havoc on our societies.

Let me repeat, the HIV-AIDS pandemic is devastating the fabric of our societies. It needs our urgent and collective action. I believe that the forthcoming Summit in Lome next July should provide an opportunity ~~to~~ ^{for} our leaders to seriously discuss this issue, exchange experiences and map the way forward. ✕

This then brings me to the second and last point, namely the horrendous and tragic humanitarian catastrophe that has befallen the people of Mozambique as a result of the recent combined disasters of a destructive cyclone, torrential rains, over-flowing rivers, and floods. I have conveyed the sympathies of the OAU to the Government and People of Mozambique for this tragedy. Apart from Mozambique, other countries in the region, notably Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa, have also experienced this unfortunate natural disaster in differing forms. I extend the sympathies of our Organization to those countries, particularly the families of those affected. I wish to report to Council that despite our meagre resources the OAU has made concrete contribution as a demonstration of our sympathy and solidarity. I have also made direct appeals to all our leaders for assistance. It is encouraging that some Member States have already positively responded to these appeals. I wish to take this opportunity to put on record my sincere

appreciation to all the African and non-African governments, institutions and aid agencies who have responded to the appeals for assistance. Naturally, we all wish that the response of the international community and especially those with the means would have been more swift.

The tragedy of Mozambique has brought to the fore a very grave deficiency that prevails in our Continent and our Organization. I am referring here to the total lack of capacity to respond rapidly and effectively to natural disasters that frequently afflict our people. Over the last few years we have sadly experienced many such disasters, including cyclones, the eruption of volcanoes, floods, as well as wild fires. We have also witnessed disasters of a technical nature. Indeed, while we are still confronted with a humanitarian catastrophe in Southern Africa, Madagascar is facing yet another disaster brought about by a cyclone. In most of these cases we have been ill-equipped to save lives and property due to the unavailability of facilities and lack of the necessary capacities.

These natural and technical disasters point inescapably to the need for better emergency preparedness in humanitarian response in the Continent. The frequency and gravity of disasters calls for greater coordination and responsiveness at national, regional and continental levels. It is ironic that we have been able to establish a mechanism to avert and deal with the man-made disaster of conflicts, but we have not prepared ourselves to deal with the unexpected natural disasters that are equally destructive and in some cases even more so. We thus need to put in place arrangements or systems which will enable our Continent to cope with these recurring crises and do so in a

coordinated manner. We should also do so in cooperation with the larger international community.

Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to conclude. We have now entered the twenty-first century. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa has characterized this century as AFRICA'S century. I believe that this is a vision which we all share. Certainly, the African people aspire for the realization of this objective. But to attain this we need to position our Continent and our Continental Organization in a manner which ensures that we are able to overcome the vagaries and challenges that could undermine our efforts towards that objective. We must vigorously pursue the Agenda of economic and social transformation through continental integration and broadening the unity and solidarity of our countries and peoples. We must intensify our efforts at promoting peace within and among our nations. We must equip ourselves to meet and do so swiftly, with man-made and natural disasters. And since our Continental Organization plays an important and indeed crucial role in harmonizing and coordinating our collective efforts, we must ensure that it is adequately equipped resource wise and that Member States fulfil their obligations financially and otherwise. If we do so, the vision of an African century will become a reality.

I thank you.