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Organization of African Unity

**Statement by H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,  
Secretary General of the OAU  
To the Summit of African First Ladies  
May 5 - 7, 1997 - Abuja (Nigeria)**

**The Chairperson,  
Distinguished First Ladies,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I wish to join our distinguished hostess in welcoming all the participants to this Summit of African First Ladies. I also wish, on behalf of the Organization of African Unity, and on my own behalf, to express my personal gratitude and profound appreciation to Her Excellency, Mrs. Maryam Abacha for her initiative to convene this Summit. May I take this opportunity to express my gratitude and appreciation to H.E. General Sani Abacha, the Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, his Government and people for the characteristic warm reception that has been accorded to us all and for the excellent facilities placed at the disposal of this important meeting.

We are gathered here today in a forum which is unique; in a Summit with a difference. This is a meeting initiated and convened as a result of the conviction and desire of African First Ladies to be more involved and to make their own contribution to the continental efforts aimed at seeking a lasting solution to the scourge of conflicts on the Continent. Indeed, conflicts are threatening to tear up African states and have brought death and destruction, misery and extreme hardship on the peoples of Africa.

In deciding to meet here in Abuja, our First Ladies, in their own right, have come to the conclusion that they cannot remain indifferent to the humanitarian tragedies as the ones witnessed in Liberia, Angola, Somalia, Sierra Leone and more recently in the Great Lakes Region. They are concerned and disturbed by the plight and immense suffering, particularly of women and children in areas of conflict. They have been sensitive to the suffering and agony of child soldiers in our Continent.

They are also concerned with the tragic experiences of millions of refugees and displaced persons in Africa who have, out of fear of persecution and other socio-economic reasons, decided to vote with their feet and move into remote and sometimes inaccessible areas. I am sure that the First Ladies, in their initiative, were also moved by the tragedy and the genocide which took place in Rwanda in 1994 - an indescribable tragedy which traumatized us all. They must have also been moved by the misery and suffering of tens of thousands of refugees and displaced persons in Eastern Zaire which were graphically portrayed by the international media.

This Summit comes as a culmination of efforts by women at all levels who are determined to make their contribution towards achieving peace on the Continent. It is, therefore, in many ways, a Summit dedicated to the African women and their invaluable role in the advancement of peace, development and progress.

This Summit marks a new beginning of the realization by African women that beyond the move towards their political and economic empowerment, there is also the need to engage themselves more vigorously and take on a more active role in the efforts aimed at resolving conflicts on our Continent.

I wish to take advantage of this Summit, to welcome other initiatives that have been taken elsewhere in support of the Peace Process on the Continent. In particular, it is my hope and expectation, that this summit will strengthen the initiative of peace missions within the framework of the decision by African First Ladies who met in Beijing, China. We at the OAU, stand ready to do whatever is within our means to facilitate such Missions, which we believe would contribute to the search for peace and national reconciliation in countries which are currently at conflict.

I wish also to acknowledge the very important role that African women leaders, community and civic leaders, as well as NGOs had played and continued to play in peace initiatives in South Africa, Angola, Rwanda, Somalia, Sierra Leone and many other African countries. Furthermore, it is now well known that locally based and African indigenous NGOs continue

to play an ever-increasing role in bringing humanitarian relief to those traumatized by the negative impact of conflicts, in Human Rights Monitoring and Conflict Resolution at community levels.

Equally, we welcome the other initiatives by women groups aimed at making an effective contribution towards the promotion of a culture of peace and tolerance in Africa. In particular, we welcome the Kampala Action Plan for the establishment of the African Women Committee on Peace, which has now become part of the African Platform for Action. Similarly, the Kigali Declaration on Peace, Gender and Development as well as the Plan of Action for Conflict Affected Areas, deserve our priority attention. As a follow-up to these declarations, we, at the OAU, hope to engage women's groups with a view to sharing their perspectives on our common objective of devising and strengthening mechanisms, that will ensure increased partnership between women and men, in political, social and economic development of our Continent.

**Your Excellencies,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

This is, as I have said, a Summit dedicated to the African women. But, it is also a Summit dedicated to peace on our Continent. Although this is obvious, there is need to underline the centrality of peace

in our endeavours in the Continent and to reiterate that there cannot be meaningful development in our countries in the absence of peace and tranquility. Therefore, Africans at all levels and wherever they are, should channel their energies and resources towards this important objective.

The OAU, as a continental Organization, has been entrusted with the responsibility of playing a leading role in efforts aimed at preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. It has been striving to assume its responsibility despite the difficulties. Since 1993, the Organization has been exerting efforts through its Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. I believe that this is an appropriate forum, for me, to pay tribute to our leaders for their support and encouragement which they continue to extend to our continental Organization in dealing with the challenges posed by the scourge of conflicts on our Continent. It goes without saying, that the commitment of our leaders to the development of Continental, Regional and National capacities, to prevent, manage and resolve armed conflicts, has given impetus and focused attention on the need to rely on our indigenous African peacemaking capabilities principally, but to be supported by the International Community.

However, beyond the efforts being deployed by the OAU, Africa is in need of the contribution and input of all Africans. We should, therefore, forge ahead with our shared vision of active partnership, cooperation and coordination, between all sections of our communities. In order to bring about a more vigorous and pre-emptive response to armed conflicts. I firmly believe that such a notion of an integrated, cooperative response to conflicts in Africa - with an appropriate division of labour, balanced and complementary responsibilities between our Governments, Organizations and civic groups, can significantly improve Africa's response to conflicts, when fully elaborated and operationalized. It is in this context that we regard the initiative by the African First Ladies as a timely one and the involvement of women in peace efforts as well as in mobilizing support aimed at the amelioration of the plight of refugees and displaced persons, as a most welcome move.

In their deliberations on the situation in the Continent and on the role and contribution towards attaining peace and stability, I believe that our First Ladies and other participants would be guided by the fact that Africa is a Continent in transition where three great things are happening, simultaneously. The first is the struggle for democracy. This seems to have gained root across the Continent but more concerted efforts are required to promote the transition more broadly and rapidly. I believe that women have a specific role to play in this important task. The second is the struggle for

economic emancipation and development. This struggle coming at the end of the decolonization process, requires concerted efforts of all, men, women and the youth acting in unison for the promotion of socio-economic development in the Continent. I believe your Summit will find it opportune to work out modalities on how best women can be involved more directly and effectively in this endeavour. The third, of course, is the struggle for peace, security and stability in the Continent. Your Summit has wisely decided, to focus on this issue. I am encouraged by your desire and conviction to make a serious contribution and to complement the efforts being deployed at the continental level to find a lasting solution to the scourge of conflict in the Continent.

Our Continent must endeavour to wipe away the image that it is a continent where conflicts are endemic and where the suffering of millions of our people either in refugee camps or in other miserable conditions is considered routine. But to do so requires the resolve and determination of all our peoples and governments. The role of the African women in this regard cannot be over-emphasized. Yet the plain fact remains that the full potential of our women has yet to be utilized. This Summit which brings together Africa's First Ladies and many prominent African women is a unique opportunity to reassess the situation and chart the way forward. Can Africa really forge ahead with confidence towards a new millennium when thousands of its daughters and sons are devoured in civil



Wars and other conflicts? Can the Continent really effectively play its role on the global arena without seriously addressing the anachronism of having about 6 million refugees and 20 million displaced persons? These are pertinent and poignant questions which I am confident this Summit will reflect on in the next three days of your deliberations. As you do so, it is my confident belief, that the Abuja Summit will make a major difference towards the mobilization of the women in the Continent for peace, security, stability and development.

If Africa is to refuse marginalization, and it must, there is no alternative but for our Continent to assume its own responsibility and leadership in facing the challenges of peace in the broadest term. The women of Africa who constitute a prominent force in the Continent must actively play and be enabled to play their full role in this noble goal. This Summit of Africa's First Ladies can and should provide a significant impetus in that direction. I am confident that through their commendable initiative, the First Ladies have manifested the clear determination to bring their position, authority and prestige to bear in pursuit of the cause of peace for our peoples. It is an initiative that we support and for which we, at the Organization of Africa Unity, Express our appreciation.

I wish you successful deliberations.