



Organization of African Unity

**Statement by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim
Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity
at the Technical/Ministerial Meeting on HIV-AIDS,
Tuberculosis and Other Related Infectious Diseases**

Abuja, Nigeria

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**Your Excellency Mr. Atiku Abubakar, Vice President of the
Federal Republic of Nigeria,**

Honourable Ministers,

Deputy Executive Secretary Lalla Ben Barka,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to have the opportunity of addressing you at this preparatory meeting of the African Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and other related Infectious Diseases. I wish on behalf of the OAU and my own behalf to express sincere thanks and gratitude to President Olesugun Obasanjo, to the Government and the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for the very warm welcome and hospitality accorded to us since our arrival in this country. Increasingly, the city of Abuja is becoming an important venue for the deliberation of critical issues concerning the destiny of African people.

The gravity and magnitude of the HIV-AIDS pandemic need no overstating. We are only fully aware of the horrendous statistics and the heart-wrenching accounts of its devastation to our people as well as to our social and economic systems. At every level, numerous resolutions and declarations have been made, institutions established, and plans of action formulated. And yet, the agony and suffering continue, and no dent has been made in containing this pandemic. To compound the situation, in the past decade, we have also seen a massive resurgence of other deadly diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and many that are associated with HIV/AIDS.

Our leaders will be convening in Abuja in the next two days. This time not to make yet another resolution or declaration, and not even to simply underscore the gravity of the spectre in our midst. All those have already been done sufficiently.

The Abuja Summit must be a Summit with a difference. It is intended to forge a common front for action. It should be an action oriented Summit aiming at pooling together, in a strategic manner, the Continental energies and those of our partners in confronting this deadly pandemic.

During the past two decades of living and fighting this pandemic we have acquired a lot of experience. Together with the trauma and devastation we have had to endure, there have been also occasions of optimism and achievement from some of the efforts made.

The Abuja Summit cannot ignore this past experience. Definitely, the factors that have impaired our capacity to contain the spread of HIV-AIDS need to be unraveled. In the same manner, those which have brought about some ray of hope need to be capitalized upon and enhanced.

We have reached a critical point for our very survival. We need to confront this challenge head-on and to mobilize ourselves in total -- in fact, as I have asserted elsewhere, we need to enter into a combat mode. Like in all combat situations, and in the particular cases of defending our very survival, all our energy and resources must be mobilized and effectively deployed.

I am confident that in your deliberations you shall underline the primary role of prevention in containing the spread of this pandemic, particularly among the youths whose vulnerability is on the rise. We must make every effort to make sure every youth in Africa is aware of the virus. We must go further: we must change behaviour. Our greatest resource in this respect is young people themselves. We must locate where the children are, whether it be in schools, on the street; every household; every marketplace; every football match -- the message has to reach: awareness and knowledge and the importance of changing behaviour.

An important aspect of dealing with this disease is to destigmatize it. HIV/AIDS knows no ethnicity, colour, race, or social status. Anybody who is not prevented can be infected. We need to extend compassion, love and care to the victims. They should be neither discriminated nor looked down upon. Victims deserve dignity and respect which is accorded to every person. We need to be open about this disease. This is the only way we can deal with it. Let us find ways of removing the prevailing stigma.

Accessibility to affordable drugs has been a vexing issues in the past four years. The recent development in South Africa relating to the withdrawal of the suit filed by the large pharmaceutical companies is encouraging. I do hope that the implications of that case will be addressed and the necessary steps that need to be taken by other African countries also examined. In the meantime, I wish to call upon drug manufacturers and the International Community as a whole to realize that in our Global Village it is reprehensible for one part to live in affluence, prosperity and to have a capacity to overcoming adversities, while the others live in misery, agony, and even denied the means of overcoming a deadly pandemic such as HIV-AIDS.

Definitely, the issue of drug affordability is critical. At the same time, it is important that appropriate infrastructure is developed that permits accessibility across the entire population. There is a need, therefore, for addressing the consolidation of a comprehensive care for HIV-AIDS victims and the impact on related diseases.

In order to fight this pandemic, tuberculosis and other related infectious diseases, we do recognize that we need a massive expansion of financing basic health programmes across Africa, with a special emphasis on HIV/AIDS. We recognize that the primary responsibility for mobilizing resources must come from within Africa itself. Nevertheless, we are also aware that no matter how hard we try, the economic and social reality of our countries can not allow us to cope with the resource requirements to fight this pandemic. We, therefore, need international assistance. We need large amount of resources, not in a token or symbolic form but massive amounts, on a sustainable basis, to be able to fight this disease.

Mr. Vice President,

Let me now conclude my remarks.

In the fight against the pandemic, we face many challenges. We have to combat stigma. Prevention of the spread of infection has not been easy either because **it involves behaviour change**. Caring for AIDS affected children and widows, and providing affordable comprehensive care should be some of our immediate priority areas. In our strategies for prevention, let us target youth who are the window of hope.

Control of HIV infection will not be complete unless we address prevention of mother to child transmission. Enabling people to have access to drugs is crucial.

In conclusion, I wish to underline that we at the OAU will remain at the frontline of this struggle. For, we believe that all our endeavours in conflict resolution; promotion of peace, stability and security; economic cooperation and integration; and the improvement of the welfare of African people will be meaningless if we allow ourselves to be decimated by this pandemic.

I thank you.