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Organization of African Unity

THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON ASSISTANCE TO
REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS
IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION:

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL

Bujumbura, Burundi

12 - 17 February 1995

Your Excellency, President Sylvester Ntibantunganya,
Your Excellency Madame Sadako Ogata, United Nations
High Commissioner for Refugees,
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I know you will have had a hearty welcome from the hospitable people of Burundi since many of you arrived here several days ago. I wish nonetheless, on behalf of the Organization of African Unity to join the host authorities of this country in welcoming you all to Bujumbura and to this conference.

I wish in particular to say how honoured we are to have amongst us, H.E. Sylvester Ntibantunganya, President of the Republic of Burundi who has gratefully agreed to come and open this Conference. On behalf of the Co-organizers of the Conference, the OAU and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, I wish to reiterate our gratitude to the Government of Burundi for hosting this Conference and putting at its disposal, the necessary facilities.

This Conference, the first of its kind to be convened, is taking place against the background of the most intensive human displacements ever witnessed in human history, which took place during and in the aftermath of the horrendous acts of genocide in Rwanda.

This Conference is taking place against the background of decades of civil strife and conflict which has precipitated cyclical mass displacements and steady flows of refugees to the countries neighbouring the region. The sad events which occurred in this region, and most recently the massacres and acts of genocide in Rwanda have traumatized societies and entire populations. Today, Rwanda is still reeling from the effects of those horrendous acts of human destruction.

In this country, years of political polarization have led to cyclical violence and the attendant mass displacements. Tensions still exist even though I am encouraged by the determination of all the parties, to persist in dialogue. Acts of banditry are still common occurrences. The task of lowering tensions further, of containing acts of banditry, of restoring confidence and of deepening and expanding the political dialogue still has to be fulfilled. For it is only if these societies, reconcile with themselves and submit irretrievably to political dialogue, that we can move forth with a comprehensive strategy to resolve the refugee problem in this region.

We have come to Bujumbura to think together and see what we can do collectively to deal with the scourge of refugees in this region. The realities we have to face are that there are millions of refugees in various camps in the countries of the region. These refugees need to be cared for while efforts continue to find solutions to the problems. We have displaced persons in the region who too need assistance. We do also have the social and economic problems brought upon

the refugee - receiving countries which also need to be addressed in the comprehensive approach we want to evolve. In addition, we have the many problems of resources, institutional deficiencies and of politics for which only the countries of this region should assume primary responsibility. It is these realities, which we must face and with which we must deal as we proceed to work out a comprehensive programme.

I do not in the least pretend that it will be easy but neither do I see any other option. The problem of refugees in this region is increasingly causing unacceptable strain to the resources, social and political stability of the region. We see growing impatience in the region over the cyclical mass movement of refugees caused by unending conflicts and civil strife. We should address the plight of the millions of refugees as we should take heed of this impatience which is borne out of the increasing strain of shouldering the burden of refugees.

In line with the obligations entered upon by Member States under the various international instruments for the protection of refugees, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that they continue to be assured of their personal safety, have access to social services and enjoy their civil rights. Those in refugee camps should equally be enabled to have freedom of movement, to access the basic means of sustenance and the right to non-refoulement.

Of course, the refugees do also have the responsibility to conduct themselves in a manner which is consistent with their status and not seek to foment chaos or acts of destabilization. Within the refugee camps themselves, the refugees need to be protected against the armed elements which threaten them and prevent their voluntary return. In the refugee camps in Zaire or to some extent in Tanzania, it will be necessary to ensure that the process of demilitarization is undertaken in such a way that the state of siege now prevailing, is lifted and those refugees wishing to repatriate voluntarily are permitted to do so. In this respect I am encouraged by the measures taken by the Governments of Tanzania and Zaire, in cooperation with the UNHCR to deal with the question of security in the camps.

We cannot at present hope to effect protection in those camps or to lay foundations for future resolution of the refugee crisis unless we are prepared to take the necessary measures to definitively resolve the security problems.

Of course the issues of security and protection are closely linked with relief and humanitarian assistance to the refugees. We need to continue to provide relief, in a way that ensures access by all, especially the women, the orphaned and abandoned children. In order however that the aid and relief agencies are enabled to handle relief distribution, the issue of their safety and that of the refugees themselves must be resolved. Access to and control of relief and its distribution by the armed elements in the refugee camps has given them added power of coercion and manipulation. This is not only undermining the whole system and structure of relief

distribution, it is also having long term effect on the future of the repatriation process itself. It is therefore necessary to move to resolve this issue so that all refugees can have access to relief without the manipulative influence of the armed elements. In addition, we must urge the aid agencies to structure relief distribution in a manner that is targeted to those most in need.

Of equal importance is to ensure that the objective of relief remains that of handling emergency situations and not of creating habits of permanent dependence on the part of refugees. Relief should be a transitory stage. It should therefore be phased gradually from the refugees camps into the countries of origin, and calibrated with associated and other political processes, so that it eventually interfaces with repatriation. We must strike a balance between providing for basic humanitarian relief assistance and speeding up the processes of repatriation.

Protection and relief assistance are meant to secure refugees while in their condition of uprootment from their countries and villages. While this condition exist, and while circumstances for the return of the refugees to their countries remain unpermitting, everything must be done to strengthen the system of protection and humanitarian assistance. But protection and relief assistance must strategically be looked at as temporary processes and holding measures while the more permanent solutions are being worked out. We cannot look at protection and relief as long term issues. For ultimately, the overriding objective must be voluntary repatriation of the refugees. And when such

repatriation becomes elusive due to the persistence of conflict or of inability to resolve the underlying problems which could permit the return of the refugees, then alternative solutions within the countries of asylum must be found. Pending fulfillment of residency and other criteria, these refugees should continue to be given the option of establishment and of naturalization. This permits the refugees to redeem self-esteem and a sense of belonging, as well as to assume full responsibilities and obligations as a citizen. The asylum countries in the region have extended this facility to many refugees. While I commend these positive policies, I wish to urge for their strengthening and expansion.

Repatriation as the ultimate objective must form the continuing central component of our strategy of dealing with the refugee issue. In the final analysis, every individual who is compelled to seek exile as a refugee has the inalienable right to return home. The right to belong, is a birth right which no political view or decision can waive or set aside. The overriding objective of the countries of this region and of the international community must therefore be to work together towards promoting conditions for voluntary repatriation. A comprehensive policy must be evolved by which all categories of refugees will be enabled to return home and as far as possible with all their property. Likewise, I see the tripartite agreements reached between the countries of the Great Lakes, the Asylum Countries and UNHCR, as constituting a positive measure which needs to be built on.

For repatriation to make meaning, it must have a direct link with resettlement and reintegration of the returnees. It will make no meaning if the refugee conditions are recreated in the countries of origin whereby the receiving centres become semi-permanent camps. While transition may be necessary as the processes of identification, registration and land allocation are being completed, the objective must be to make it as short-lived as possible. Prolonged processes will create alienation among the returnees and could undermine the whole process of repatriation. At the same time, we should see how the process of resettlement and reintegration can be sustained, as the returnees are given access to land, shelter and even to inputs like seeds and hoes. Repatriation and resettlement being the last stage of the continuum of the refugee process, must be given the emphasis they deserve. It will therefore be necessary to see how this process can link with those of development so that the reintegration of returnees is synchronized with the ongoing development programmes and the people are made to benefit from them directly. For in a very real sense, addressing the issues of development and fighting poverty and under-development is one component of the strategy for long term peace and stability.

Refugees come and hopefully to leave at a future date. They find people where they run to and they leave them behind when they repatriate. These people and communities are at the front line. They provide refuge and food to the refugees at the critical moment of flight and hold the fort until the authorities of the receiving states and the international community respond. This is a very heavy burden indeed and these communities which have sacrificed and

continue to extend hospitality to the refugees deserve our gratitude. They have done it out of selflessness even if by their charity they placed inordinate burden on themselves. Basically however, they lack the resources. This is why a comprehensive strategy to deal with the refugee problem in this region must include an examination of the contribution of the receiving communities and states and how they could be assisted in mitigating the impact of the refugee burden on them. They should be assisted in the rebuilding of the infrastructure, the schools, hospitals, water supplies which have been stretched to the limit and at times destroyed by the refugee influxes. The social disruptions and disorientation caused by the stress of dealing with the refugees, have serious implications to society which must be addressed. These communities and countries must also be assisted in arresting and reversing the environmental degradation caused by these refugees.

We habitually put emphasis on refugees for the simple reason that by their crossing of borders into other countries, they become visible and subject of international attention. But there are those many more who are uprooted from their homes and villages but remain displaced within their countries. This category of displaced persons need to be assisted and taken as an integral part of the strategy to provide relief, repatriation and resettlement. These people suffer the same indignity of displacement, endure the same hardship of camp life and quite often without the attention and assistance of the international community. We, should

therefore, see how the international community can work with the Governments of this region, to bring the problem of the displaced in line, particularly with those of resettlement and reintegration.

What I have described are the policies, procedures and principles. They are the mechanics of servicing refugees and those displaced. But refugees need not be there in the first place. They are not indispensable. They are simply an aberration arising out of failure of politics. Refugees in this region belie failure of dialogue and the resulting serious civil ruptures. In order therefore that we may put an end to refugees in the region we need to revert to the very underlying causes. For no body should be sentenced to a life of uprootment, statelessness and of wandering hoping for the charity of strangers.

This region has experienced all that can be painful about the refugee condition. One hopes that the lessons it has learnt will convince it on the need of a new beginning and a commitment to change and to find peace again. This is why we must persist in helping the region restore and sustain political dialogue which will ultimately guarantee and safeguard whatever strategy may be evolved in comprehensively dealing with the question of refugees.

No amount of pleading and encouragement will restore peace and stability in this region, unless its leaders and people are willing and ready to change. They must come together in a new partnership to build new habits and

attitudes, to build a new political and social culture which will ensure stability and put an end to the systemic violence and the cycles of displacements.

We must continue to urge the most comprehensive grasp of the principles and policies governing treatment of refugees. Whether in the institution of asylum, protection, assistance, repatriation and reintegration, we must equally recognize that these are principles which must be secured by the necessary political will and commitment. And that commitment must lie in the reaffirmation of our determination to work together to create conditions which will restore confidence among all segments of society. Specifically we need to work together to create systems and societies which are founded on justice. We need to put in place mechanisms and create institutions which seek to protect and guarantee fundamental human rights and promote peace and stability in this region. Likewise, we need to create in this region, societies which are leveraged on a balance of rights and obligations and not those divided and held hostage by the forces of extremism. This region must be assisted to find the middle course of moderation and mutual tolerance. It needs to begin converting from a culture of division and intolerance and the violence they bring, to one of accommodation and political equity. A critical component of a strategy to make that conversion, is without doubt, the removal of arms and munitions from society.

Your Excellencies Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a region which has seen years of fratricidal conflicts with horrendous consequences. It remains in great torment as conflict continues to simmer and mutual confidence remains shattered. The region therefore needs to retrieve itself from this dangerous fringe and restore itself to peace and harmony. This region needs to overcome the divisive legacies of colonialism and of decade of political rigidities which have dangerously polarized society and set the countries along the path of conflict. This region must be prepared to make the necessary political amends and accommodation, so as to depart from the politics of exclusion and ethnicity which have sown seeds of endemic and cyclical violence in this region.

The people of this area need to make a clean break with the past and usher in a new beginning and a process of rebirth and self-renewal. They need to set ground for the new society based on shared values and of one people belonging to one country and bound together by common destiny. There is need to build new societies founded on justice, equality and mutual accommodation. These societies should find common ground in politics of inclusion and on the need for a partnership for transformation. For it is only through the creation of stable societies, that those refugees now outside the borders of their countries, can find the confidence to return and stay and ultimately to redirect their energies from mutual destruction to collective development.

The OAU remains fully disposed to help the countries of this region face the challenges of building the new society.

I thank you.