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Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL
OF THE OAU, DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM AT THE
TWENTY-FIFTH ORDINARY SESSION OF THE
AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND
PEOPLES' RIGHTS**

Bujumbura, Burundi
April 27, 1999

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- **Mr. Youssoupha Ndiaye, President of the
Supreme Court of Senegal and Chairman
of the African Commission on
Human and Peoples' Rights,**
- **Honourable Ministers,**
- **Members of the African Commission on
Human and Peoples' Rights,**
- **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am glad to be given this opportunity to address the 25th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. It was originally planned that I join you for the opening ceremony upon my return from Antananarivo, Madagascar, where I was to attend the initial stage of the Inter-Island Comorian Conference. However, in view to the circumstances which prevailed during the negotiations with the various Comorian parties, I felt it necessary to extend my stay in order to help in promoting an agreement between the parties. Nevertheless, I am pleased to be here today, to

underscore the cardinal importance which I, personally, and the Organization of African Unity attach to the issue of human rights in general, and to the work of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, in particular.

From the outset, allow me to salute the commendable efforts made by the government of Burundi in hosting this session of the African Commission. This is in itself a manifestation of the desire of this country to embrace democracy and the cause of human rights. In this regard, I wish to acknowledge the significance of holding this session of the Commission in this country. All of us have been witness to the difficulties that the people of Burundi have undergone in the past few years. The OAU is gratified to note that despite the problems which continue to plague the Great Lakes Region, in general, and Burundi, in particular, considerable efforts have been made, and continue to be made by the people and leadership of Burundi to achieve lasting solutions to the problems, and to consolidate the process of social and political reconstruction, democracy, peace and national reconciliation. These efforts deserve our strongest support and encouragement.

The struggle for human rights is not new on our Continent. Indeed, the struggle for human rights has been part of the OAU agenda since the inception of the Organization. For it must be recalled that the very establishment of the OAU was, in large part, driven by the desire of the African peoples and their leaders to eradicate colonialism, neocolonialism and the odious systems of apartheid and racist minority rule from our Continent. This struggle was, in essence, a struggle for human rights. Today, the OAU continues to be driven by the conviction that respect for human rights is a fundamental factor for the creation of a political environment which is necessary to ensure democracy, good governance and the rule of law in our societies. Moreover, we believe that it is only through a strong and genuine commitment to the protection and respect for the human rights of all citizens that we can create a propitious environment which would enable the full realization of our people's political and socio-economic rights.

When we look back at the history of our Continent, we realize that we have made a long march on the road which we have followed through our struggle for human rights. We must acknowledge the progress which African States have made in their efforts to promote and protect human rights. Over

the last few years we have witnessed significant changes in the human rights situation in Africa. Indeed, African governments have increasingly come to realize that their people are not prepared to continue to be helpless victims of arbitrary and undemocratic rule, injustice and impunity. They have also come to accept that human rights violations are themselves obstacles to national unity, development, peace and security.

At the institutional level, it is encouraging to note that all Member States of the OAU have now ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The adoption of the Protocol on the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights further testifies to the significant positive evolution in promoting and consolidating the Human Rights Agenda in our Continent. I would, therefore, wish to seize this opportunity to pay tribute to all those who have contributed, in one way or another, to the defence of the cause of human rights in Africa and to encourage them to persist in this noble struggle.

Yet as we laud our achievements, it is important that we also recognize our shortcomings – and in some cases serious ones. We cannot overlook the fact that human rights violations continue to occur on a daily basis in our Continent. Indeed, in some cases, the basic rights of our people, especially the women and children continue to be abused. And nowhere is this abuse more blatant and flagrant than in situations of conflict which unfortunately abound in our Continent. The traumatization of our children is particularly poignant. All this has led to our Continent being perceived as one where there is little value given to human rights. This situation and perception must change.

The protection of human rights in Africa is a goal that we must all strive to achieve. All actors concerned must mobilize and coordinate their efforts to achieve this objective. It is, in fact, a challenge and an obligation incumbent upon all of us: governments, national institutions or organizations, individuals, and civil society, including non-governmental organizations engaged in human rights work.

Many of you will recall that this challenge has been recognized and reaffirmed by African governments themselves as recently as ten days ago. The Grand Bay (Mauritius) Declaration and Plan of Action, which the First OAU Ministerial Conference on Human Rights in Africa adopted in Mauritius on 16 April 1999, put a particular emphasis on the role of the various actors in the promotion and protection of human rights. In this respect, the role of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights received particular recognition and important.

The Grand Bay Declaration has taken note of the critical role of the African Commission in the promotion and protection of human rights in Africa and reiterated the need to evaluate the structure and functioning of the Commission and assist it to remove all obstacles to the effective discharge of its functions. The Declaration also recognizes that there is an urgent need to provide the Commission with adequate human, material and financial resources.

I am aware that the Commission has made remarkable efforts to surmount the various practical and financial difficulties which have plagued its work since its inception in 1987. I wish to take this opportunity to reassure the Commission of my full support for its work and to reaffirm my commitment to do everything within my means to ensure that we can improve the Commission's working conditions.

The members of the Commission who are here today will recall that I previously made this commitment to the Commission. Since then, I have endeavoured to secure the co-operation and understanding of the relevant OAU organs to ensure that they provide the necessary resources which are required for the improvement of the functioning of the Commission and the Commissioners themselves.

As a result of these efforts, and the sensitivity demonstrated by these organs, I am pleased to inform the Commission that during its last session held in March 1999 the Advisory Committee on Administrative, Financial and Budgetary Matters adopted a series of measures aimed at facilitating the work of the Commission.

At this stage, I would like also to thank all our partners who have, in various ways contributed to supporting the functioning of the Commission. I commend the excellent relations which the African Commission has established and maintained with all these partners over the years. I have no doubt that these relations will not only be maintained but that they will be developed with a view to further enhancing the cause of human rights in the continent. As you hold this 25th Ordinary Session, I am, therefore, confident that together and with the assistance of our partners we should work towards strengthening the Commission and enabling it to perform the responsibilities entrusted to it efficiently.

The agenda of this session contains items which, once more, bear witness to your determination to contribute to the strengthening of the African system for the promotion and protection of human rights. I am referring, in particular, to the items relating to the Protocol on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Draft Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. These instruments have a cardinal importance for the practical protection of the human rights of all African peoples. They thus need your support. I would, therefore, like to appeal to you, in

collaboration with national human rights institutions and the various human rights NGOs with which the Commission has established partnerships, to reflect on the appropriate ways and strategies needed to ensure speedy ratification of the Protocol on the Court, and early finalization of the Draft Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa and the speedy ratification of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

I wish you utmost success in your deliberations during this session of the African Commission.

I thank you for your kind attention.