



Organization of African Unity

**Statement by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary
General of the OAU at the Fourth Extra-Ordinary
Session of the Central Organ of the OAU
Mechanism for Conflict Prevention,
Management and Resolution at the
Level of Ministers**

**Mr. Chairman,
Your Excellency Ato Meles Zenawi,
Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic
Republic of Ethiopia,
Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegations,
Distinguished United Nations Under Secretary General
and Executive Secretary of the ECA,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to this Fourth Extra-Ordinary Session of the Central Organ of our Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution being held at Ministerial Level. I am particularly grateful for your prompt response to our invitation, at short notice, for the convening of this Extra-Ordinary Session.

I wish also to place on record, my profound appreciation and gratitude to His Excellency Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia who has kindly accepted my invitation to address this Extra-Ordinary Session of the Central Organ. Prime Minister Meles was one of the Leaders who took part at the Nairobi Regional Summit and I have no doubt that the Central Organ will benefit immensely from his insight as well as the approach taken by the Leaders of the Region. His presence amongst us here today, is yet another eloquent testimony of his personal commitment and that of his Government and people to the cause of peace, security and stability on our Continent. Mr. Prime Minister, I wish to thank you most sincerely.

I wish also to seize this opportunity, to express my sincere appreciation and that of the General Secretariat to the distinguished Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria, who took the initiative to request for the convening of this Session of the Central Organ. This initiative could not have been more timely given the grave situation prevailing in the Great Lakes Region. This initiative serves to enrich the ongoing discussions within the Organization on how to improve the working methods and efficiency of our Mechanism.

Indeed, I have always held the view that for our Mechanism to be more relevant and effective in fulfilling its mandate, there is need for the General Secretariat and the Member States particularly, those serving in the Central Organ, to work closely together in responding to crisis situations that confront us. It is within this context, that I find the initiative of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria very opportune. I am confident that as we move ahead in our common endeavour, this interest, support and involvement of Member States in the work of the Mechanism will be strengthened so as to enable us together, meet the challenge of building peace in our Continent.

Mr. Chairman,

Our Continent is again confronted with a political and humanitarian crisis of grave proportions. The presence here today of so many Foreign Ministers and other Heads of Delegations is a testimony of the seriousness and concern that we all attach to the very disturbing developments in Eastern Zaire and the new cycle of violence, destruction and deaths in the Great Lakes Region in general.

Mr. Chairman,

This extraordinary session of the Central Organ is taking place at a very critical juncture in so far as the situation in Eastern Zaire is concerned. The great humanitarian tragedy that is unfolding there has rightly aroused the concern of the entire international community. So has the serious escalation of tension and insecurity. Our meeting is convening amidst the background of several initiatives - African and non-African, aimed at defusing the crisis and in particular how in the first place to provide the urgently needed humanitarian relief supplies and to facilitate the return of the refugees to the countries of origin. As we meet we have the benefit of the deliberations of the Nairobi Regional Summit and the deliberations of the U.N. Security Council among others.

I do not therefore propose to engage in a long expose as to the origin and nature of the crisis. It would however be in order to make some general observations. First, the crisis in Eastern Zaire with the grave humanitarian, security and political dimensions if not contained and overcome poses a threat not only to the entire Great Lakes Region but beyond. Second, the unfolding tragedy in the Great Lakes Region has its roots in historical developments and the cyclical refugee crises that continue to strain inter-state relations. Third, it is a tragic irony that it would be idle to pretend that this crisis has taken us all by surprise. Put differently, we all saw the makings of the unfolding crisis but were unable or not prepared or ill equipped to take the appropriate measures on time, to prevent the present round of humanitarian tragedy and hostilities in the Great Lakes Region.

I would like to dwell a little longer on the issue of refugees which continues to be the central problem of the crisis in the Sub-region. There are more than a million Rwandese refugees in Zaire. There are also about 700,000 Rwandese Refugees in Tanzania. All these and others who went to Burundi did so in the aftermath of the horrible genocide that was perpetrated in Rwanda. But for the purpose of our focus at today's meeting, let me just concentrate on the Refugees in Zaire. Out of more than a

million refugees, there are also the bulk of the former Rwandese Army and the Interahamwe -the militia who together with some elements of the former Army are known to have been responsible for the genocide and massacres.

The international community and especially the United Nations and in particular the UNHCR, the OAU and many others have tried to work for the return of those refugees to Rwanda. But no meaningful progress had been made. An essential and perhaps the central reason why this has not been achieved is the role of the armed elements among the refugee community. Efforts to separate the intimidators have at best been feeble and the status quo had been maintained with disastrous consequences both for the bona fide refugees and the stability and security of the region. And yet all of us have consistently recognized that unless this issue is effectively addressed, the pleas for the refugees to return home will by and large remain just that - pleas!

We all recall that the Government of Zaire had expressed its readiness to have the armed elements especially the members of the former Rwandese Army moved from the refugee camps and relocated further inland. We all had supported this proposal. But it was abandoned because the international community could not find the resources needed. As we look back and bearing in mind the current catastrophic situation which is very costly both in terms of human life and the resources which have to be mobilized to save

lives and restore some degree of normalcy, one cannot but lament the failure to act more decisively when the opportunity had presented itself. The effect of non-action has been the maintenance of the status quo in which elements of the former Rwandese Army and the Interahamwe have continued to intimidate bon fide refugees and prevent them from returning home. It has also made it difficult in containing the destabilizing activities of those armed elements among the refugees especially their cross border incursions into Rwanda leading to killings and counter killings and contributing in no small measure to the escalation of tension between Zaire and Rwanda.

It is generally believed that if the refugees were not subjected to harassment and intimidation, most of them would return home. Indeed even now as some of the bona fide refugees including the most vulnerable ones among them attempt to return back to Rwanda in the midst of the heart-rending humanitarian conditions, there are news reports that the armed elements have continued to obstruct their path and in some case have even resorted to physical attacks and killings. In calling for the intensification of efforts towards voluntary repatriation of refugees to Rwanda, the Heads of States and Government participating in the Nairobi Regional Summit also called for the implementation of the long standing decisions "to separate the intimidators and bona fide refugees". There may however still be other refugees who may hesitate to go back home due to other concerns. And here the Rwandese Government with the support of the international

community has a clear responsibility to intensify their efforts to create the necessary conditions to allay their concerns and ensure their safe and orderly return.

Mention must also be made of the fact that the international community has not responded effectively to the genuine concerns of asylum countries like Zaire and Tanzania which have experienced serious socio-economic hardships and political tensions besides enormous environmental degradation as a result of hosting such a large influx of refugees. This already complex situation was further compounded by the most recent developments in Eastern Zaire which evolved around the situation of the Banyamulenge, particularly, the tension and hostilities which later ensued.

A combination of these internal and external factors, has contributed to the exacerbation of the existing tension first within Zaire itself and then between Zaire and Rwanda. The most immediate evidence of that deterioration in the relationship between the two countries had been the escalation of the rhetorics, accusations and counter accusations.

This tension later found expression in the recent outbreak of hostilities and fighting which resulted in the flight and dispersal of hundreds of thousands of refugees from their designated camps. We remain most

disturbed by reports of the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe involving mass starvation and deaths of some of these refugees.

As you will observe from my Report to this Extra-ordinary Session, I have since the outbreak of the crisis, undertaken extensive consultations both within and outside Africa, as part of efforts aimed at defusing the tension. I was in contact with the Current Chairman of our Organization and with the leaders of the region as well as with other leaders and Government high officials of other African countries. I also held discussions with some members of the UN Security Council, the United Nations Secretary General, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and representatives of other non-African countries.

In undertaking those consultations, I was particularly keen that prompt and appropriate action be initiated first at the level of the Region, to address the unfolding humanitarian, political and security crisis in Eastern Zaire. I was and I still am of the view that a regional initiative which has the support of our Continental Organization should constitute the right basis for international action.

As part of those efforts, I despatched a high-level delegation to Zaire and Rwanda to assess the situation and convey a message of restraint. A meeting of the Central Organ at the Level of Ambassadors, was also convened to consider the situation. Most recently, I took part in the Regional Summit convened by President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya on 5 November 1996 to examine the crisis in Eastern Zaire.

The Summit after very serious deliberations, adopted a Statement calling for a cessation of hostilities and articulating a number of principles which are critical for any serious attempt to resolve the crisis.

The leaders who were moved by the plight of refugees in Zaire and concerned that necessary measures be taken to address this terrible tragedy recommended the setting up by the UN Security Council of a neutral Force to provide security for safe corridors and temporary sanctuaries to facilitate relief supplies with a view to easing the suffering of the refugees and displaced persons and to facilitate the orderly and secure the return of the refugees to their country. While reaffirming its commitment to the territorial integrity of Zaire in accordance with the OAU Charter and the Cairo Declaration of 1964 on the territorial integrity and inviolability of national borders as inherited at independence, the Summit also reaffirmed the inalienable rights of all people within the internationally recognized territorial boundaries as stipulated in the OAU Charter on Human and

Peoples' Rights and other International Convention relevant to the right of citizenship and nationality. The Summit also called for non-intervention and an end to cross border incursions. All these principles are fundamental. The importance of unity, territorial integrity and stability of Zaire need not be overemphasized. All the countries of Africa have a stake in supporting and safeguarding this.

It is my firm conviction, that those decisions by the leaders of the Region, constitute an important framework for action by the International Community to end the hostilities thereby creating a conducive environment for the resumption of dialogue and negotiations aimed at bringing about a lasting and durable peace, security and stability. I believe that this stand by the Nairobi Regional Summit, merits the strongest support of our Continental Organization.

This position by the leaders of the Region, was duly transmitted to the UN Security Council. Since then and as you are all aware, the Security Council deliberated on the letter of the UN Secretary General, in which he inter-alia, proposed three options related to the establishment of a multinational Force; a United Nations Peacekeeping Force; or a Regional force. The Security Council on 9 November 1996, finally adopted the proposal for the eventual establishment of a multinational Force which was considered by the Secretary General as having greater advantage in that *“it*

permits the deployment of a well equipped and well supported Force, with adequate financial backing, more rapidly than if the task was entrusted to the United Nation, while keeping open the possibility for a UN Force to take over from the multinational Force as soon as conditions permit”.

Operative paragraphs 7, 8 and 9 of Security Council Resolution 1078 (1996) stipulate:

"STRONGLY URGES Member States, on an urgent and temporary basis and in cooperation with the Secretary General and with the OAU, to prepare the necessary arrangements, in consultation with the States concerned, to allow the immediate return of humanitarian organizations and the safe delivery of humanitarian aid to displaced persons, refugees and civilians at risk in Eastern Zaire, and to help to create the necessary conditions for the voluntary, orderly and secure repatriation of refugees;

REQUESTS the Member States concerned to report to the Council through the Secretary General on those arrangements as soon as possible to enable the Council to authorize the deployment of the multinational force referred to above upon

receipt of the report, which will inter alia reflect the results of the consultations with the States concerned in the region, and bearing in mind the need to ensure the security and freedom of movement of the personnel of the multinational force referred to in paragraph 6 above;

DECIDES that the cost of implementing such an operation will be borne by the participating Member States and other voluntary contributions, and ENCOURAGES all Member States to contribute to the operation in any way possible."

Mr. Chairman

Honourable Ministers

Ladies and Gentlemen

Clearly one of the most urgent issues facing this meeting, is how best to respond to the very grave humanitarian crisis in Eastern Zaire. The challenge before us is what can urgently be done to ensure that relief supplies reach the tens of thousands of refugees and displaced persons who have been on the move as a result of the hostilities and

what should be done to facilitate an early and orderly return of refugees to their countries of origin. Considering the nature of the Crisis, the need for urgent action need not therefore, be over emphasized.

With respect to the decision by the United Nations Security Council on the deployment of a multinational Force, the question is how best African countries can and should contribute to such a Force? The rationale of having a Force established by the United Nations Security Council, as proposed by the leaders of the Region is obvious. Such a Force, which in the view of the Nairobi Summit, should have been a fully fledged United Nations operation would have enabled African countries to fully take part since the constraints on resources would have been taken care of by the World body. As consultations are going on on this issue, I believe it is pertinent to note that, from our perspective, the establishment of a Force under the full responsibility of the United Nations would better serve the objective set by our leaders in Nairobi regarding the establishment of a Neutral Force.

Now that this option is not being contemplated by the UN Security Council at least for the time being, we need to urgently consider how African countries can be enabled to take part in the Force being envisaged by the UN Security Council. More specifically, how to ensure that the necessary resources are made available to sustain the participation of African countries in what we want to be seen as a genuine international peace undertaking based on a true partnership between Africa and the rest of the international community. Since the proposed multinational Force will not strictly be a United Nations operation but rather a Force authorized and supported by the United Nations there will be need to have clear commitment on financial, logistics and material assistance to enable African countries to participate. A mechanism to this effect needs to be urgently laid down. It is superfluous to emphasize that an effective African participation in the proposed Force is pivotal for the success of our joint endeavours.

There is an international consensus on the need to act and act urgently. For us in Africa, that urgency assumes an even more critical dimension. Clearly, time is not on our side.

I am confident, that this gathering of Ministers of our Central Organ will rise to the challenge of the occasion, so that we can, in concert with the International Community, act in a manner, that will bring relief to the thousands of the long suffering refugees and displaced persons in Zaire and the region, facilitate the easy and orderly return of the refugees and thus contribute towards promoting durable solutions to the problems so as to allow the peoples of the Great Lakes Region, to live in peace and harmony. As we endeavour to do so it is important that we avoid the pitfall of the past. It should be our objective to search for long term solutions to the ever recurring crises in the Great Lakes Region by addressing the humanitarian, political and security dimensions of the conflicts which continue to tear societies in the region, cause repeated suffering, death and destruction. And this is why I believe that a global approach to the resolution of some of the problems facing the Great Lakes Region and the creation of a climate of confidence and understanding as called for by the Security Council is very much in order. We need to work elaborately and with deliberate speed to prepare for the International Conference which the OAU has repeatedly supported.

I thank you