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Organization of African Unity

**Address by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim
Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity
to the Executive Board of UNESCO
Paris, 24 October 2000**

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**Madame Sonia Mendieta de Badaroux, Chairperson of the
Executive Board of UNESCO,**

Dr. Kaichiro Matsuura, the Director General of UNESCO,

Representatives of Members of the Executive Board,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed an honour and a pleasure for me to get an opportunity of meeting of the representatives of members of the executive board of this important institution and to be given the privilege of addressing the Board. I wish, in this respect, to thank Madame Sonia Mendieta and Mr. Kaichiro Matsuura for inviting me to participate in the 160th session of your board. In fact, during the preliminary consultations about my participation in this forum, you had offered me the option of coming much earlier. Unfortunately, due to prior commitments, I could not do so. Nevertheless, I have endeavoured to be here even if it is towards the end of your deliberations as a way of expressing the OAU's appreciation, support and encouragement for the important and valuable work that UNESCO is performing in the African continent.

In taking part at this session I am aware of the immense responsibilities that UNESCO's executive board shoulders in promoting some of the critical faculties of human development. In this context, I have taken note of the fact that this particular session of the board, among other things, was devoted to considering the budget and Medium-Term Strategy for the work of UNESCO in the coming few years. I thought, that this perhaps could be an opportune occasion for me to share with you some of the challenges confronting the African people, and the initiatives that are being taken to overcome them as we enter the new century and the beginning of a new millennium. Hopefully my participation may contribute towards even greater cooperation between our two institutions and towards building the required synergy between UNESCO's activities and the endeavours of the African people and their Governments.

This session of the executive board is taking place at a very significant juncture of human development. It is a time when the phenomenon of 'globalization' has reached unprecedented levels, leading to a profound transformation within societies and between them. Advances in information and communication technology have completely revolutionized modes of functioning in societies. Developments in science and technology have not only engendered higher levels of efficiency but have also significantly altered patterns of production and wealth generation.

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The tragic anomaly about all these changes is that they are also associated with a severe threat for some of our societies to be completely marginalized out of this historic drift. Reference is being made now to the information and knowledge gap – which some refer as the 'digital divide' - and also a widening of the technological gap between advanced industrialized countries together with a few emerging economies, and those of African societies and others like them. There is a drastic contrast on how needs are being catered for as one moves from communities in places such as Dar es Salaam, Niamey, Luanda, Antananarivo, on one hand, to those of Paris, London, Frankfurt, New York or Tokyo on the other hand.

The striking dimension of the 'divide' is that the driving elements tend to correspond with UNESCO's areas of competence. It is the mastery, access, and control of knowledge, information, science, and technology that define positions in the emerging world order and that has relegated societies such as those in Africa to marginal positions. Indeed, among the challenges that Africa is facing as it enters the new millennium in striving to have a proper place in the international arena includes the issue of the knowledge divide and its ramifications.

The adverse consequences of this divide to Africa's development cannot be overstated. There are the obvious ones such as the difficulties of increasing our share of international trade, the failure to attract the type of investments that can create sustainable development, and the obstacles faced in increasing performance efficiency. In addition, however, the divide has contributed to forestalling our capacity to galvanize the basis for the growth and development of our people and societies, particularly after the setbacks we suffered in the 1980s. Thus, Africa enters the 21st century with systems of education that are under severe stress, with agencies for the development of science and technology that are extremely weak, a basic infrastructure that is wanting, and a people traumatized by several man-made and natural disasters and an excruciating debt burden.

The leaders of our Continent had realized right at the inception of independence that our progress and prosperity as a people and the ability to overcome the weaknesses bequeathed on us depend on the degree we can pull together our efforts and energies through cooperative and integrated endeavours. This is a vision that we have strived to pursue consistently and systematically during the last forty years. It has enabled us to win political independence and to bring to end the apartheid regime. During the past two decades we have directed our efforts at building structures of economic cooperation and integration as a basis of harnessing our collective potentials. And

as you may have heard, on 9th September 1999, African leaders meeting in Sirte decided to accelerate this process by creating an African Union, whose Constitutive Act was adopted during the last OAU summit in Lome and which has by now been signed by 30 Member States.

Notwithstanding the many obstacles that have to be overcome in the quest to build and strengthen the unity and cohesion of our people, there is no option but to persevere in that direction. The existing fragmented entities that constitute our nations has been the main source of our weakness in all aspects. It is in this perspective that we are entering the new millennium with a reinvigorated commitment to direct all efforts to promote closer cooperation and integration. It is our expectation that the activities of our partners will also contribute to successful attainment of this objective. UNESCO, an organization which is involved in the critical function of building skills and awareness, as well as protecting and promoting a developmental culture has an important role to play in complementing our efforts in forging unity.

Quite clearly, in order for Africa to become an engaging actor in the global arena and to succeed in its efforts at socio-economic transformation through cooperation and integration, there has to be an internal environment of peace and stability. That is why we have to eliminate the scourge of conflicts that is currently afflicting some parts of the Continent.

The African people have suffered the devastation caused by incessant conflicts. These conflicts bleed our people and traumatize our societies. They have resulted in considerable loss of life and untold suffering. They create bitterness and hatred among the people. They have forced the people to vote with their feet thus rendering them as refugees or internally displaced. They have generated the phenomenon of 'child soldiers' with its severe implications, not least of which is to deprive these children of their right to be children. Conflicts, in general, have undermined many of the achievements the Continent has made since independence and impaired the potential for growth and development. They have destroyed valuable asset of the continent, including some of the indigenous institutions that are critical for our survival and development as a people.

Conscious of the magnitude and dimensions of conflict in our Continent, there has been determined efforts to end such conflicts. From the very beginning of the Organization of African Unity various approaches were used in seeking for ways of preventing and containing such conflicts. But in recent time there has been an intensification of these efforts as the proliferation of conflicts have wrought more havoc and destruction to our societies. Thus, in 1993, African leaders decided to be more proactive and to create a mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution. The main objective is to detect at a very early stage the potential for conflict and to devise means for its prevention or containment. While the mechanism is still being developed, it has been deployed in resolving conflicts that have occurred. Indeed, it is an incontrovertible fact that in all the conflicts currently raging in the Continent, it is African leaders and African institutions who are in the forefront of the efforts to resolve them.

More significant, an important component of conflict prevention has been a determination to promote a culture of peace among our people so that we can maintain our togetherness and resolve our differences amicably. Once again, this is an area which falls along the domain of UNESCO's activities. I would like in this regard to register

my appreciation for the initiatives that we have taken together in promoting this important aspect of Africa's development. I am confident, that as you deliberate on your programs and strategies you shall seek for ways of enhancing this aspect.

Apart from conflicts, our Continent has found itself in the last two decades experiencing the terrible devastation caused by HIV-AIDS. This killer pandemic that is devastating huge parts of our continent has led to a wiping out at a stroke all the gains of increased life expectancy that we have made in the latter decades of the 20th Century. Indeed, it is a pandemic that has killed more people than the total number of lives lost in conflicts during the same period. Worse still, as we all know, its victims have been the age group that is the most productive in our societies thus crippling our efforts at development and economic growth. It is striking down huge numbers in critical occupations, including teachers, civil servants, business people, medical professionals in the prime of their life. The damage to the social fabric is immense.

There is indeed an increased recognition that AIDS is a serious threat to the African people and to the Continent. While efforts are being made to improve the political and socio-economic milieu in the Continent, if the AIDS pandemic is not contained, such efforts will not only be undermined, but, in some cases, they will come to naught. In this respect, as of now, the disease has no cure. However, it is

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increasingly being realized that the only remedy is prevention which can be made mainly through awareness raising and behaviour change. In this regard, education and culture are recognized to be critical elements in our struggle to combat the AIDS pandemic. We are pleased to observe that some of the African countries, such as Uganda and Senegal, that have succeeded to arrest the spread of HIV-AIDS among the population have intervened through the spheres of education and culture.

Scientific support to some of the critical areas of Africa's development need also to be directed at building capacities for coping with natural disasters whose frequency and destruction seem to be increasing. Recent experience has sadly demonstrated that the lack of system of dealing with such disasters has contributed to the higher levels of damage suffered. I am aware that within the traditional conception of development assistance, disaster management may be a responsibility of some other specialized agency. However, in terms of creating local capacities it is essential that the necessary skills for prediction and emergency management are integrated in our training schemes and scientific programmes. Furthermore, it is important that structures are put in place and capacities developed at national, regional and continental levels for dealing with disaster situations.

Madame Chairperson, allow me at this juncture to dwell briefly on one component of UNESCO's programmes that cuts across all challenges facing Africa today. This is the area of education. Indeed, as it was noted at the World Forum on Education held in April, this year, in Dakar Senegal, the challenge for education in Africa is quite enormous. In fact, it is in recognition of this enormity that African Heads of State and Government meeting in Yaounde in 1996 declared the period 1997-2006 the Decade of Education in Africa and mandated the General Secretariat to prepare a Programme of Action for its implementation.

As a reflection of our commitment to collectively address the challenges in education, the OAU convened a Conference of African Ministers of Education in March 1999 in Harare, Zimbabwe, whose recommendations on equity, relevance and effectiveness of our educational systems, and more importantly, the utilization of complimentary learning modalities and capacity building were endorsed by the OAU Summit meeting of Algiers, in July 1999.

Key to the implementation of the Programme of Action of the Harare Conference is the realization that the pivotal role of education has to be enhanced by investing in the development of our human resources through training, and only then, can we be able to transform Africa's economic potential and attain sustainable development. Unfortunately, investment in educational and other

crucial social sectors has been falling alarmingly due to the lack of budgetary resources in many of African States. The worst victims in this connection have been women, whose number in all educational levels has remained very low.

It is in this regard that I look forward to UNESCO's support in facilitating the implementation of the Programme of Action and back-stopping the implementation committee and also in devising strategies for the promotion of the education of women in our continent.

Similarly, support is also needed in our attempt to orient the educational system in our continent so that it can reinforce the strengthening of the democratic process and a culture of peace, the pursuit of cooperation and integration, the combating of various social and natural maladies, as well as the harnessing of the positive cultural traditions and talents which our continent has in abundance.

In my presentation, I have tried to elaborate on some of the areas of concern, as well as the problems and challenges facing our Continent. I have also tried to demonstrate the linkage that exist between what Africa is doing and the programme agenda of UNESCO. Clearly, the concerns that I have raised are not all inclusive. There are many others that I have not adumbrated. For example, I could spend time to express concern on the repercussions to Africa

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on the problem of brain drain. Similarly, I could have talked at length on the burden of external indebtedness and its implications on the welfare of our people, including how it impacts negatively on the quality and quantity of education. I could also explain in great detail on the plight of women and youths in our Continent and the need to seek for ways and means for surmounting the obstacles being faced in unleashing their remarkable potential.

If I have avoided to go to the details of these issues, it is because I am aware that I am not talking to an audience which is not aware and interested about these problems. I have been encouraged by UNESCO's own expression of concern and commitment about these issues. It is positions such as the one expressed in the report of the Committee to Follow up the 'Audience Africa' initiative, that was ably chaired by our Sister, Madame Graca Machel, that gives us hope and encouragement. The report identified several challenges facing the Continent, which need attention and support. These include: peace, development, democratization, debt, youths, women, education and science, information and communication technology, multiculturalism and dialogue among cultures, as well as integration and Pan-Africanism.

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One cannot add more to this delineation of our Continent's challenge, except to reassert that what was true in 1999 when that committee was making its observation, is still very true today. It is in this respect that I am encouraged also by the fact that UNESCO continues to give due importance to Africa's concerns within the context of the Organization's areas of competence. Indeed, because of the unique situation of our Continent, I believe that UNESCO's concern on Africa's problem is a service not only to the people of our Continent but to humanity as a whole.

I cannot conclude this address without paying tribute to the Director-General for the efforts he is making in strengthening UNESCO. Indeed, African countries are sensitive and appreciatively concerned of the noble and important role that this institution is performing in its multifaceted agenda. It is widely recognized in the Continent that the development of human resources is a key factor for the liberation of a society and for the generation of growth and development. As we deal with the many challenges facing our Continent we are only fully aware of the importance of education, culture, science and technology as being critical factors in our endeavour to overcome these challenges. It is in this respect that the OAU would like to work with UNESCO more closely in achieving our common objectives.

We live in an interdependent world that has been made much smaller by advances in science and technology. It is now being referred to as the 'Global Village'. But as it is the case in a village, there are rules and traditions that ensures the harmonious living of all the members. These include the elements of caring for each other, responsibility to the whole, and mutual coexistence. It is unthinkable within our global village for one part to be immersed in affluence and opulence, while the other part languishes in abject poverty, disease, ignorance and despair. Naturally, the two will intermingle, and the effect will not necessarily be positive. It is therefore essential that the imbalance is rectified so that we develop in our global village a harmonious living for all of us. We will continue to rely on UNESCO's support and competence in pursuing this vision.

I thank you.