

**Address by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the OAU,
to the University of Botswana
Gaberone, 15 February 2001**

Madam Vice Chancellor of the University of Botswana,

Members of the University Community,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed a pleasure for me to have the opportunity of addressing members of the University community. I wish to thank the Government of the Republic of Botswana for including this session as part of my visit to this beautiful and dynamic country. I am also grateful to the university leadership, the faculty and students for accommodating this occasion at a time when probably classes should be in session.

This University is well renowned for its Pan-Africanist disposition that has provided a congenial atmosphere for the flourishing of intellectual pursuit by scholars from all parts of the Continent. For decades, the University of Botswana has remained a haven for critical thinking and the thriving of a knowledge discourse informed by a diversity of academic traditions of our Continent. It is thus an honour for me to get the privilege of participating in sustaining this tradition. Recent experience in our Continent underscores the importance of preserving this Pan-African characteristic. The University, being one of the leading institutions in shaping the future of Africa, has a major responsibility in promoting and enhancing this attribute and should indeed remain at the vanguard.

On my part, I have been highly inspired by the continental nature of this community. I find it appropriate, therefore, to devote my address this evening, to the challenges facing Africa, and our Continental Organization – as we enter the new century and the new millennium. As I reflect on the challenges, I shall endeavour to highlight the initiatives being taken at a continental level aimed at surmounting them.

**Mr. Vice Chancellor
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

There is a profound sense of satisfaction that Africa enters the new century as a Continent free from classical colonialism, and that the apartheid

regime has been defeated. We have managed to liberate the whole continent against the indignity of foreign rule and to obliterate the despicable system in which human value is determined by the pigmentation of one's skin. Unfortunately, our success in these struggles has not in all cases engendered the essential freedoms from poverty, disease, persecution, ignorance, and marginalization.

Africa still trails in all the indices of human and economic development. Our Continent is confronted with conflicts, corruption, endemic poverty and perpetual calamities, both natural and man-made. It is still haunted by the scourge of conflicts. Conflicts continue to 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. In some cases, conflicts have degenerated to the level of sectarianism and xenophobia whereby primordial identities such as ethnicity, religion, region become a basis for hostility.

The AIDS pandemic continues to wreck havoc among our people. The figures published by UNAIDS in November 2000 show no signs of decrease in the magnitude of the pandemic in our Continent. Around 26 million adults and children are now living with HIV/AIDS in Africa. 7 million young people aged between 15 and 24 years are infected with the virus, and sadly, around 600,000 children are being newly-infected every year. It is reported that 95% of the 13.2 million children orphaned by AIDS are in Africa, where 40-70% of all beds in big cities hospitals are occupied by HIV patients in most severely affected countries.

In the economic sphere, the position of our Continent in the global economic transactions has not shifted from what existed in the 1950s. Africa remains peripheral in international trade and investments, in technological acquisition and development, and in the general flow of financial resources. While the real per capita income has been seen to rise in the last five years, it is still below the levels of the 1960s in many parts of the Continent. We are still importers of capital goods and insignificant exporters of unprocessed primary products, and we remain vulnerable to economic instability that is triggered elsewhere. At the same time, we spend a substantial amount of our foreign earnings to servicing a foreign debt that is increasingly proving to be unpayable.

All these negative attributes characterizing our Continent are real, and they cannot be denied. Unfortunately, often times they are projected as being the main feature of our Continent. Clearly, however, this is not the case. There

is a more substantial dimension of the African situation and development that tends to be neglected in presenting its image.

Success stories such as that of Botswana and those of many other African countries are often overlooked. The large part of Africa that has maintained peace and stability, and that has been registering positive growth rates in the last decade is given no attention unless a calamity occurs. The fact that Africa is changing, and changing in a positive and multifaceted manner makes no news in the dominant media.

There is an important lesson that can be derived from the persistence of the negative image despite the substantial positive developments in the Continent. The lesson is both perceptual and real. At a perceptual level, it may not be difficult to distinguish the tension and instability obtaining in the Balkans, in parts of Spain, or even that which occurred in Northern Ireland for quite some time, from the overall situation in Europe. At no point has the image of Europe been subsumed within the perturbations occurring in those few areas.

In the case of Africa, however, the situation is different. Our history of being subordinated, our young nationhood, and the fact that the dominant media is out of our control have all contributed to the persistence of a condescending situation of being perceived in aggregated terms. The Continent is presented as a homogenous entity with few inconsequential differences. The instability and distortions which prevail on parts of the Continent are thus generalized to apply to the entire Continent. This has an implication to the collective integrity of all Africans. For as long as parts of this Continent generate negative perceptions in any way, it is the integrity of the entire Continent that is also at stake.

More critically, however, the problems experienced in Africa not only demand collective intervention, but when left unchecked they have a tendency of inflicting cross-boundary impact. Over the past two decades, we have seen the aftermath, across boundaries, of negative factors such as conflicts, excessive poverty, pandemics, and environmental degradation. At the same time, we have also witnessed the benefits accruing from policy harmonization and sectoral coordination. All in all, the imperative for closer cooperation and integration in Africa is not simply an option but a necessity for the survival of our individual nations.

It is a historical reality that African leaders have time and time reasserted the need for closer unity. Indeed, the very creation of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 and the determination to maintain and consolidate its activities, is a clear demonstration of the resolve to realize, in a concrete way, that faith in unity. Similarly, it was from with this objective that the Lagos Plan of Action was pronounced in 1980 elaborating on a path for

economic integration in the Continent by using Regional Economic Communities as the building blocs. This was followed by the enunciation of the Abuja Treaty on the establishment of the African Economic Community that was signed in June 1991.

African States have adopted the Abuja Treaty and the Treaties of the Regional Economic Communities, as blueprints for achieving sustainable and rapid development through regional integration. In doing so, we have come to realize that economic power of nations has become by far the most dominant factor in the relevance and importance of countries in the emerging global order. This is why even the major world powers are continuously striving to widen and strengthen the base of their economic strength, through a conscious effort to expand their economic space and market size.

In the case of Africa, a continent which has been marginalized for too long a time in the world economy, integration is no longer a matter of convenience, but an indispensable strategy for survival and development. The pace of globalization, coupled with the sweeping wave of economic liberalization, and with the imbalances in the distribution of the benefits in favour of the strong economies, has increased the urgency for all our countries to join hands to expand, fortify, solidify and integrate their economic space, to serve as a platform for take off and effective integration into the global economy. Regional integration therefore at the very least constitutes Africa's response to globalization, and an instrument to reverse the trend towards marginalization of the continent.

It cannot be disputed that some advances have been made in the quest to foster closer integration in the Continent. However, as we approached the end of the 1990s, the obstacles confronting our endeavour were quite immense. Our Continent was being threatened increasingly into marginalization by its failure to cope with the demands of globalization. It was becoming evident that even stronger economies, with their advanced technological base, were finding it necessary to consolidate their level of economic integration as a means of gaining from the opportunities of this historic phenomenon.

Within the Continent, the people of Africa were confronted with multiple setbacks of incessant conflicts with the attendant consequence of deaths, disruption, security, instability, and considerable destruction; they were also suffering from the trauma of the HIV-AIDS pandemic and other killer diseases, and experiencing frequent natural disasters.

We have realized that the magnitude of the external and internal challenges could be handled only by consolidating our unity. The status quo and the nascent structures of integration could not sustain the impending threat. Thus, on 9.9.1999, the 4th Extraordinary Assembly of Heads of State

and Government of the OAU meeting was convened in Sirte, in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. The Sirte Declaration was proclaimed. Through this historic commitment, Africa's leaders agreed to establish an African Union, in conformity with the ultimate objectives of the Charter of the OAU and the provisions of the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community. In addition, the Heads of State and Government decided to accelerate the process of implementing the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, through the shortening of the implementation periods, establishing of all the institutions provided for the Abuja Treaty, including the creation of the Pan-African Parliament.

In Lome, Togo, on 11th July, the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government adopted the Constitutive Act of the African Union. As of today, 30 Member States have signed the Act and by the end of December I expect several more to have also signed. The Lome Summit also took a decision on the convening of a Meeting of African Parliamentarians in order to consider the Protocol on the establishment of the Pan-African Parliament. That meeting is scheduled for start tomorrow, here in Pretoria.

The African Union, is first and foremost, an expression of a determination to elevate the framework of Continental integration. The agreement that was reached in Sirte and later Lome, after a frank and rigorous exchange of views among our leaders demonstrated a desire to come up with an even stronger instrument that can enable our people and Government overcome the challenges confronting them.

The African Union is structured to overcome the institutional limitation of the OAU as it has historically evolved with a stronger orientation to pursuing the political agenda, and the African Economic Community with a stronger disposition to the economic agenda. By fusing and streamlining the two institutions and in the process developing a coherently integrated agenda, the African Union becomes a stronger body.

The strength of the African Union is enhanced by its institutional structure which endows it with a number statutory bodies for policy making, consultations and operations that are built into it. In addition to the Assembly and Executive Council, it will have: a Pan-African Parliament; a Court of Justice; a Commission (replacing the Secretariat); a Permanent Representatives Committee; Specialized Technical Committees; an Economic, Social and Cultural Council; and Financial Institutions.

Several issues come to mind in assessing the prospects for achieving the objectives of the African Union. In the first place, and as I have stated earlier, African countries simply do not have a choice within the existing global system except to come together. The artificially balkanized nations that we have are not viable entities in today's world, economically and even politically. As separate entities, their market potential is limited, their productive capacity is constrained and they are inflicted with numerous political stresses. The only alternative is to cooperate and integrate.

The integration option is reinforced by the fact that it is currently in the global agenda. The consolidation of such institutions as the European Union, the North Atlantic Free Trade Area (NAFTA), or the Atlantic and South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), to name only a few, is a demonstration of the recognition by even the most powerful countries that the challenges of globalization can be overcome only by working closely together. The proliferation of giant mergers among international private companies further confirms the inevitability of this trend which Africa is not a position to avert.

Furthermore, there is a new global culture that fosters closer integration, particularly for weak economic and political systems such as those which exist in Africa. The phenomenon of globalization itself, which requires a high speed of performance, which operates across boundaries, and which has altered systems of production, distribution and consumption has instigated new roles and new capacities of the state. The existing formation of individual state structures in Africa cannot cope with the dynamic of globalization.

Liberalization and democratization are also part of this new global culture, which in the economic realm necessitate an increased opening up across boundaries. The obliteration of barriers of exchange and predominance of market forces promote economies of scale and encourage integration. Similarly, the consolidation of democratic political systems fosters inclusiveness and even solidarity across boundaries.

The Continental experience of cooperation in various spheres also offers brighter prospects for closer integration. Contrary to some concerns, the quest for integration in Africa did not start last year. There is an experience of cooperative endeavours, both politically and economically that spans close to half a century. The OAU is more than 37 years today and its Member States have accumulated a lot of positive experience on unity and solidarity. There is also decades of experience with the Regional Economic Communities. Many of these are today exhibiting robustness and dynamism and have proved beyond doubt that they can viably serve as building blocs for Continental integration.

The most profound dimension in the prospects for Continental integration is that the role of the people is given due attention in establishing

the African Union. The Sirte Declaration unambiguously stipulates that "as we enter the 21st century, and cognizant of the challenges that will confront our continent and peoples, we emphasize the imperative need and a high sense of urgency to rekindle the aspirations of our peoples for stronger unity, solidarity and cohesion in a larger community of peoples transcending cultural, ideological, ethnic and national differences." To this end, the Declaration pronounces the intention of establishing a Pan-African Parliament "...to provide a common platform for our peoples and their grass-root organizations to be more involved in discussions and decision-making on the problems and challenges facing our continent." And, tomorrow, here in Pretoria, peoples' representatives from all over the Continent will be meeting to consider a Protocol for the establishment of the Pan-African Parliament. Thus, the involvement of the African people in this enterprise will engender a stronger dynamism in realizing the objectives. Indeed, this element, coupled with the fact African leaders has demonstrated a genuine commitment for realizing the vision of the Founding Fathers. Their frank and rigorous discussions in Sirte and Lome and the enthusiasm that is being exhibited in the signing the Constitutive Act are all indications of brighter prospects for Continental integration to be attained.

While the prospects for establishing the African Union may be appear obvious, it could be naïve to under-estimate the obstacles and enormous challenges that lie ahead. The most obvious, and often talked about, is the scourge of conflicts. This has been an *Achilles' heel* for our Continent. 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. In some cases it degenerates to the level of sectarianism and xenophobia whereby primordial elements such as ethnicity, religion, region become a basis for hostility, or African people considered to be 'the others' are discriminated against and sometimes even assaulted.

Conflicts, in general, have undermined many of the achievements the Continent has made since independence, impaired the potential for growth and development, and undermine the opportunity for integration. Every effort has to be deployed in eradicating this scourge. At the same time, it has to be recognized that cooperation and integration is the most effective means of preventing, containing and resolving conflicts.

Another challenge that has to be surmounted relates to poverty and the weak economic base of our countries. Many of the initiatives are handicapped because of lack of resources and sufficient capacities. Often times we are constrained to overcome the initial costs of integration that would allow us to

reap the long-term benefits. By remaining preoccupied with basic issues of subsistence we are disabled in terms of launching into innovative and advanced processes that could facilitate the integration processes. Thus, Africa's absorption of the new information and communication technology is poor, the infrastructure is lacking, productivity is low, and the productive base tends to be homogenous. All these, however, can be overcome, with determination and concerted efforts.

To some extent, it is the poverty factor that is sometimes taken advantage by the powerful actors in the global system to further fragment us and undermine the integration efforts. For example, it is not uncommon for our rich partners to promote trading arrangements that separate one region from the other. The fact that we desperately need the preferential treatment or the support from these partners sometimes compels us to succumb to such divisive measures.

There is also the challenge of sustaining the momentum of the integration process. The Sirte and Lome processes represent an opportunity in which positive forces for reinvigorating the historical desire for continental integration prevailed. The Sirte Declaration was essentially a compromise between those who felt the need to expedite the process and move towards fuller integration and those who were somewhat cautious and preferred to move more gradually. It is this compromise that needs to be sustained and takes us beyond the hurdles of initiation. In this respect, the Constitutive Act of the African Union is a reflection of that middle ground and the necessity to maintain the momentum. At the moment, it may not be the most perfect instrument, but it retains a usefulness in assisting the launching process. It still needs refinements and additions. And that is a challenge which will have to be overcome in the near future.

For the immediate course in Africa, we need to ensure that the signing and ratification prowess of the Constituent Act is expedited. At the same time, while the goal of Pan-Africanism has always inspired millions of our people both within the Continent and in the Diaspora, we have to sensitize them all generally on the implications and sacrifices entailed.

I remain confident that despite the daunting challenges and the various tasks that we have set for ourselves, we shall overcome. This is because our resolve remains firm and our determination to accomplish the tasks is strong.

I thank you all.