



Organization of African Unity

**Statement by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, the
Secretary General of the Organization of African
Unity at the Arusha Peace Talks on Burundi**

Arusha, Tanzania
21 February 2000

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GENERAL OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY
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Excellencies Heads of State and Government

Ladies and Gentlemen

I should like, at the outset, to join in extending a very warm welcome to the Regional leaders and other distinguished guests who have responded to the invitations of President Yoweri Museveni and President Nelson Mandela to be present at this meeting. Your presence here is an eloquent testimony of your commitment to support the efforts of finding solutions to the challenges that confront our Continent. Among these challenges, is the conflict in Burundi which for sometime now, has remained a source of grave concern to all of us.

I should also like to express a warm welcome to all the Parties from Burundi whose presence here today, I want to believe, reflects their keen desire to negotiate in good faith for a new political dispensation in Burundi, one that will provide Security and Democracy to all Burundis.

My special appreciation goes to President Benjamin Mkapa, the Government and the people of the United Republic of Tanzania for the untiring efforts they have deployed to bring peace to Burundi. This is hardly surprising, the history of this country and the city of Arusha in particular, is one of active support and hospitality to those who have felt

the need for a serene environment to negotiate for peace, stability and security in their countries and for their peoples.

A few months ago, the leaders of this Region, who have shown a remarkable commitment and perseverance to assisting our Burundi brothers and sisters, met here in Arusha in their eighth Regional Summit on Burundi.

That Summit was unique in many ways. First of all, it took place against the very grim background of the passing away of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, the first Facilitator of the Burundi Peace Process. Mwalimu's sad loss cast a shadow over the process and created a moment of doubt and uncertainty over the prospects for a continuation of the Arusha Peace Process that he had launched in a characteristically skillful manner. Indeed, Mwalimu had succeeded in laying the foundation for this process right up to when he had to succumb to his mortality. We, who worked closely with him in his difficult task, are aware of the commitment that he brought to the process in spite of numerous obstacles.

I would like, therefore, once again, to pay a most deserved tribute to the late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere for his major contribution to the peace efforts in Burundi and for his devotion to the liberation of our Continent from oppression, bigotry and intolerance. I am absolutely convinced that Mwalimu's legacy will always endure and that history will be fairer to him than this process had been.

The other significant aspect of the Eighth Regional Summit was that it gave the Arusha process a new impetus with the choice of a new Facilitator in the person of our beloved and esteemed elder statesman President Nelson Mandela, whose stature and sterling qualities are renowned worldwide. I would like to salute you Madiba, and to express our deep gratitude to you for having accepted, in spite of your numerous

domestic and international obligations, to help the people of Burundi reconcile with one another. The task will indeed not be an easy one. But we are aware of your tenacity which paid off well for South Africa and surely will enable us to achieve the desired goal in this process. I wish to assure of the OAU's unequivocal support for your efforts to achieve a lasting solution to the conflict in Burundi.

The recent Arusha consultations and the subsequent discussions at the UN Security Council provided us with an opportunity to put the Arusha process back on track. We have noted with satisfaction the desire of the Facilitator to involve a maximum number of actors in the negotiations, particularly the armed groups operating on the ground.

It is a fact that the delicate mission of the Facilitator cannot succeed without the close cooperation of the people of Burundi. I wish, in this regard, to underscore the fact that in the final analysis, it is the Burundis themselves, who will make the ultimate decision on their destiny and that they have the primary responsibility for restoring peace and security in their country in a spirit of dialogue, trust, compromise and mutual accommodation. The OAU and the rest of the International Community can only help. The people of Burundi and their leadership must, therefore, be able to build upon the achievements made so far and seize the opportunity of the momentum generated by the appointment of a new facilitator, to overcome the remaining obstacles and more rapidly conclude negotiations.

I need not underscore to Burundians the sense of urgency required in bringing to an end the prolonged insecurity and humanitarian crisis that has engulfed your nation. I wish to remind you, in this regard, of the essential need for greater seriousness and a spirit of give and take for the success of these negotiations. Let me repeat, President Mandela can and

will certainly help. All of us here, as well as the larger international community, can also individually and collectively contribute. But none of us can take your place. You and only you must accept the responsibility in the success or setbacks of the negotiations.

We are aware that since the early days of the Arusha peace Process in June 1998, considerable progress has been made. Four rounds have taken place at which the protagonists have not only conducted, in a predominantly calm atmosphere, a general debate on the major issues that constitute the essence of the Burundi conflict, but also – and this is in my view one of the major achievements of these talks – have interacted informally, in the corridors of the Conference Centre or elsewhere in Arusha and had momentarily risen above their differences to talk together as members of the same family.

Within the country, progress has also been made along the road to national understanding and national reconciliation in spite of setbacks here and there, occasioned by the actions of extremists and enemies of national reconciliation.

This is encouraging and gives us reason to be optimistic that a solution is on the horizon. In the light of the current developments in Burundi and in the Arusha Peace Process, this solution does not seem to me to be merely an ideal to be aspired for; but an objective that is clearly within our reach.

As the peace process evolves, it is important to emphasize the complementarity between the internal initiatives in Burundi and the Arusha Peace Process and to stress that the efforts made in Arusha will have to be reinforced by those initiated inside the country. In this connection, we have consistently emphasized the organic link that exists between the Arusha Peace Process and efforts towards peace and national reconciliation within Burundi itself. The two processes are mutually reinforcing.

The optimism we feel today, deriving from the appreciable progress made in the Arusha peace process, should not lead us to be complacent. The task ahead of us remains formidable and most arduous. Reconciling a Nation that over the years, has been torn apart by cycles of conflict and violence, is certainly a major challenge. Transforming mind sets so that Burundis can tolerate and accept one another despite their differences; to live together in harmony and in full equality in order to build the national edifice destroyed by years of hatred and war, will unquestionably be a major challenge for this process, yet, it is an objective which we have set for ourselves and on which we cannot afford to fail.

The successful conclusion of the Arusha Peace Process will mark a historic turning point in Burundi. I should, in this respect, underscore the fact that the success of the Arusha Peace Process will require an immediate end to the current orgy of killings by those in arms in Burundi. For far too long, have innocent people, women and children in Burundi been subjected to the most brutal and macabre spate of mindless killings. I want to say to all Burundis, that no cause, no politics can justify the shedding of so much blood, especially when there are peaceful alternatives for redressing grievances and arriving at a mutually satisfactory settlement. And in any case, the wanton killing of civilians is utterly unacceptable and should be stopped forthwith.

It is my firm conviction that since the path of dialogue and negotiations is now open, there is no reason why this channel should not be effectively used by all concerned. We, therefore, fervently and urgently appeal to all those engaged in fighting to return to the path of negotiations. The people of Burundi and the different political actors as well as the countries of the Region, have a clear responsibility to continue to encourage this path. It is our firm conviction that there is no substitute for dialogue and negotiations. We all understand that, given the bitterness, the misunderstanding and the trauma experienced, the way forward is not going to be an easy one; but dialogue and mutual accommodation is the only way to restore peace, security and national reconciliation in Burundi. The OAU is determined to support the Burundis in that endeavour. We shall do so in close consultation and cooperation with the Facilitator of the Burundi Peace Process President Mandela, and with the countries of the region.

I would also like to pay special tribute to our external partners who have extended generous assistance to the Arusha Peace Process. I am encouraged by the continued interest of the representatives of the International Community who are here with us today. I should like to urge them to continue to extend their political, diplomatic, material and financial support to this important process. But I would also like to urge the Parties to the conflict in Burundi, not to take for granted the interest and support of our partners. Experience should reach us that the interest of the International Community is not limitless. The Parties should therefore show more seriousness and negotiate in good faith.

On our part, the OAU, despite its limited resources will continue to support the peace process within Burundi as well as provide the political, diplomatic and financial support to the Arusha Peace Process under the able facilitation of President Nelson Mandela.

As we meet here, we are beginning to see the signs of light at the end of the tunnel. We must not, however, allow this self-optimism to lead us to complacency, nor should we show any prevarication in the pursuit of the objectives that we are all aspiring for. We, therefore, honestly appeal to the Government of Burundi and to all political forces to act in tandem and in a concerted manner to ensure the success of the Arusha Peace Process and the efforts being made within the country. That is the real challenge before all of us. We cannot afford to fail.

I thank you.