



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU,
AT THE SUMMIT OF AFRICAN FIRST LADIES
ON CHILDREN AND HIV/AIDS PREVENTION**

KIGALI, RWANDA

22 MAY 2001

Your Excellency Madam Jeannette Kagame, First Lady of the Republic of Rwanda and Hostess of this Summit,

Your Excellencies First Ladies present here today,

Honourable Ministers,

Distinguished Ambassadors and Representatives of International Organizations and Agencies,

Invited Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel greatly honored to be with you here today, in this beautiful country, and to join you in addressing the vital and urgent issue of Children and HIV Prevention. On behalf of the OAU, I would like to thank Madam Jeannette Kagame, the Government and People of the Republic of Rwanda for organizing this Summit and also for the wonderful hospitality accorded to us since our arrival in Kigali.

This meeting is quite significant in the collective efforts of our Continent to combat this deadly pandemic that has wrecked havoc among our people and that is threatening to deny a future for millions of African children. As First Ladies of our Continent you occupy a unique position in providing and consolidating the leadership required to surmount this challenge. Your convening here in these three days and the conscious decision you have made to address a core aspect of this tragedy, that is, the plight of children and the prevention challenge, bears testimony to your recognition of the onerous responsibility that you are carrying.

As First Ladies of our nations you are also endowed with the deep sensitivities of motherhood and what it entails in coping with children confronted with the trauma of HIV/AIDS. As mothers you do bear a heavier social and emotional burden not only in the process of providing care to our children who live with the virus and suffer from the disease but also in striving to ensure that the remaining children are not infected and affected.

I wish, in this respect to pay tribute to Madame Jeannette Kagame for taking the initiative of inviting her colleagues and sisters to share experiences, rededicate yourselves, and to reinvigorate your endeavour in fighting this pandemic.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

For two decades now our Continent has been bedeviled by a devastation of unimaginable proportions caused by HIV/AIDS. The suffering and trauma caused by this dreadful disease has been at its severest among women and children. Africa is losing the natural cradle of its survival, in every sense of the word, as more women and mothers are decimated in the most horrendous manner by this pandemic. The very people who throughout history have assumed a leading responsibility in nurturing our families, providing care to our communities, being custodians of our morals, values, and traditions are now being annihilated by this vicious disease. These are the very people who have played the most critical role in the most vital sectors of production and who in a very significant way have been ensuring the survival of our societies.

To compound this tragedy, it is now reckoned that more than 12 million children are now growing up without the care, love, and guidance of their parents - of their mothers and fathers. They are orphans who are being condemned to the margins of our societies. It is shattering to imagine the future of 12 million children of our Continent and indeed millions more if the current trend continues; children who have been already traumatized by living with parents with AIDS. How are they growing up? Who is there for them? What is their notion of love, happiness, values, and even of the future? How is society preparing to relate with them? And equally serious, how will the relate with society as they continue to grow in this condition?

The situation is made even more dire by the armed conflicts which continue to plague our Continent. These conflicts bleed our people, destroy our resources and engender animosity and bitterness. As you have already observed in your deliberations, women and children are the main victims. Armed conflicts expose population to greater vulnerability to HIV infection, put pressure on the already-overstretched health infrastructures, destroy those precious infrastructures, and reverse the hard-won gains that we have made within this area. Definitely, we all think about these grim realities, but I do believe that you as First Ladies and you as mothers, get a piercing pain when you reflect on the implications of all these to the children and to our societies.

Adding to the pain is the heart-wrenching realization that millions of our unborn children are at this moment lying unprotected from HIV infection because mothers cannot be provided with the necessary drugs for prevention of transmission. This is particularly agonizing because we know how it can be prevented.

This disease is a catastrophe that is shattering our Continent. It is a threat to our survival. It is a threat whose devastation is getting more and more severe. If we leave aside the horrors of genocide and massacres that had been

perpetrated in this country in 1994, nothing else has caused such a destruction of African people and with such rapidity than HIV/AIDS. It is for this reason that this pandemic should be considered as the worst form of attack against the African people. The staggering numbers of lives lost, the critical points in our socio-economic systems that have been incapacitated, and the looming loss of our future as a people, are devastating outcomes that surpass any war situation.

HIV/AIDS constitutes a serious threat to our very survival. We must take all measures to defend ourselves and safeguard future generations. And as I had occasion to point out when I addressed the African Development Forum last December in Addis Ababa, we must treat this crisis as we would when confronted with an armed invasion. Like in all war situations, total mobilization is required. Our societies, in their entirety, have to enter into a combat mode for liberating themselves from the pandemic. Everybody should be mobilized through increased awareness and sensitization.

As has been repeatedly stated in the course of your deliberations, one negative aspect that has hampered mobilization has been prevailing attitude of stigmatization, particularly for people living with HIV/AIDS. We need to understand that HIV/AIDS can affect anyone if precautions are not taken. It is colour blind. It respects no race, no religion, no ethnic group and no geographical boundary. It attacks the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak. It is simply an awesome menace constantly wanting to destroy. There is, therefore, no reason for stigmatization of any person. In fact, those who are affected must be given compassion, love and care. Furthermore, stigmatization can only serve as a disincentive to people living with HIV/AIDS not to reveal their status and, in some cases, out of frustration and bitterness, they may act in a manner which may serve to spread further the infection.

We need to break the culture of silence and to confront the factors which contribute to the spread and recalcitrance of this disease. Let us continue being more open about the how HIV/AIDS is caused and how it can be prevented. The fact that literally it is the young people who are increasingly being affected shows that the prevention message is not reaching them. We cannot afford to remain silent while our youths and children are being denied a future.

**Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen**

This meeting of First Ladies comes only a few weeks after the Abuja Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and other Related Infectious Diseases. This historic first ever Special Summit in the subject was preceded by the African Development Forum that was held in Addis Ababa on December 2000 which addressed the leadership challenge in combating this pandemic. Both

the Forum and the Summit underscored the immensity and complexity of the challenge facing our Continent in the fight against this pandemic and reiterated the inescapable imperative that all of us need to be engaged in a concrete manner in fighting this pandemic.

Representatives of African Governments, International Organizations, institutions of civil society, people living with HIV/AIDS, as well as youths and children underlined the need to act now, because we have lost of time and this is the key moment for action. At the Abuja Summit, a Framework for Action was agreed upon that provided a new impetus and a collective commitment in ensuring the implementation of a number of measures. I am gratified that in your deliberations here in Kigali you deliberated on the priority areas of the Abuja Declaration on HIV/AIDS and the Framework for Action as well as the African Consensus adopted by the African Development Forum.

In terms of the focus of this meeting I cannot resist reciting the poignant words of a youth, Master Abayomi Rotimi who appealed to the Heads of State and Government assembled at the opening by saying, and I quote:

You are the people who ask us to go and fight; ask us to join election campaigns; now we are dying. We need you to fight with us against AIDS.

He asked leaders to make laws that protect the rights of young people; he begged parents to spend more time with the children and talk to them on how to grow up and become responsible citizens and he urged fellow young people to protect themselves, stay healthy, stay alive!

Definitely we have come a long way in living and dying with this pandemic. The fact that our societies are bracing up for taking action; and that our leaders, including you the First Ladies, are demonstrating a commitment and determination to combat this catastrophe offers some hope and optimism. Nevertheless, the challenges remain quite daunting because the number of infections continue increasing and, worst of all, it is the children that are being most affected.

The most viable weapon at our disposal is prevention. Every effort should be deployed so that the spread of this disease is contained. As leaders and mothers you occupy a critical position in ensuring that African youths and children are adequately informed about this calamity and knowledgeable on how to protect themselves. We must dispense with some of the taboos and endeavour to speak frankly with our youths and children. They have to be assisted in overcoming the pressures that compel them and lead them to being infected. We must go even further and change behaviour towards reinforcing the avoidance of those actions that contribute to the spread of the pandemic.

Our priority should be to create an environment where a social immune system, a social vaccine is established through behaviour change.

For those children who have been either infected by the virus or affected by the trauma of losing their parents and caretakers, it is essential that an institutional framework for providing care should be consolidated. Our traditional structures have had robust systems for coping with such situations. However, the magnitude of the pandemic is so overwhelming that even these mechanisms are no longer sufficient. It is essential, therefore, that we devise ways and means of revitalizing such institutions because, as it has been proved in other areas, community-based facilities are the only viable means of coping with such challenges.

In the last few years we have been relieved by the discovery of some palliative drugs that help in improving the lives of people living with the virus and the disease. Unfortunately, the high cost charged for the drugs have prevented our people from benefiting from these drugs. We are now encouraged by the recent development in South Africa where the large pharmaceutical firms have withdrawn the court case preventing the importation of affordable generic drugs for the use of our people. I do hope that the opportunity will be examined particularly in the best ways to ensure accessibility to these drugs across the entire population.

Both at the African Development Forum and at the Abuja Summit it was recognized that the HIV/AIDS requires an extra-ordinary and unprecedented mobilization of resources. In his address to the Summit, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan underscored that it requires a total amount of between US\$7 to 10 billion a year globally to carry out a realistic fight against the epidemic. Bearing in mind that more than two thirds of the people affected by HIV/AIDS are in our Continent, then a bulk of those billions are required for Africa.

While Africa should continue to play its part, and should reorient its priorities in order to contribute to the battle against this pandemic, the fact remains that given the economic constraints facing us, including external indebtedness, our capacity remains limited. We certainly are not able to cope with the enormity of the crisis. We need international support. Africa needs assistance, massive assistance to supplement its own efforts.

It is in this respect that I wish to pay tribute to Secretary General Kofi Annan for his initiative of launching a global fund to fight HIV/AIDS. I also welcome the pledge made by President Bush of the United States of contributing US\$200 million to this fund. The amount required to fight this pandemic is quite colossal, but this is only a beginning. I do hope that the United States will contribute more in the near future, and that other countries will also do so generously. Resources are needed not only in promoting

prevention and the infrastructure for care, but also in encouraging the search for a vaccine to this pandemic.

Finally, we at the OAU are committed and determined to deploy every effort in fighting this pandemic. We will continue to remain in the front-line of this struggle not only in dealing with the specific challenges pertaining to the spread of the virus and the disease, but equally important in addressing the conditions such as conflict, poverty, alienation that lead to its exacerbation. I am confident that through your unique position in our societies and the exchange of experiences in such forums your leadership role will be enhanced. Furthermore, your meeting here in Kigali, taking place immediately after the Abuja Summit, will add to the impetus and momentum that is now building in the Continent in combating this pandemic. Later this month – indeed next week – we at the OAU, together with UNICEF, are organizing a Pan-African Forum on the future of children, and I am confident that your deliberations in this conference will enrich the proceedings of the Forum, especially in laying strategies for dealing with the challenges that confront the children and youths of our Continent. At the same time, by meeting only a few weeks before the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on AIDS, your deliberations will contribute towards the strengthening of the African position at the UN General Assembly next month.

I thank you.