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Organization of African Unity

STATEMENT OF H.E. DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU ON THE OCCASION OF
THE CELEBRATION OF THE OAU DAY



Fellow Africans,

Once again, time has come to observe another Anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity. Thirty-three years ago in 1963, the founding fathers of our Continental Organization articulated a strong vision for the future of our Continent.

They committed themselves to liberate the Continent from colonial rule and racist domination. They initiated the struggle for the economic and social development of the Continent. They recognized the imperative necessity to build African unity and solidarity and to promote international understanding and cooperation. Moreover, the founding fathers were convinced of the need to foster economic cooperation and integration in the Continent. Significantly, they affirmed their determination and commitment to resolve conflicts on the Continent by peaceful means.

Thirty-three years later, the liberation struggles on the Continent have been crowned with success. This monumental achievement is a product of sustained dedication and commitment of the African peoples to the cause of freedom and dignity on the Continent. At the same time, thirty-three years later, Africa has established and assumed its position and responsibility internationally. But, as we celebrate the Thirty-third anniversary of Africa's Liberation Day, the state of our Continent continues to be a mixture of hope and despair. Africa is a continent at cross-road.

We see a decline in Africa's economic performance, a proliferation of intra-state conflicts and a resurgence of inter-state disputes. But, we also see Africa forging ahead to address all these problems with renewed determination and vigour.

On the economic front, Africa has embarked on economic reforms with far-reaching social and political implications. Most of our Member States have adopted policies and programmes aimed at economic reforms. At the same time, most of the African countries have put in place measures and established macro-economic frameworks to reverse the trend and to ensure better economic performance.

The continent has made some progress in the area of economic cooperation and integration. These efforts need to be consolidated within the framework of the African Economic Community. In this regard, priority should be given to the strengthening of the regional economic groupings that are the building blocs of the Community. Some of these regional economic groupings are currently faced with multitude of problems, both human and financial. It is therefore important to revitalise them so that they can support the integration process.

In recent years, conflicts have come to occupy the centre stage of Africa's agenda. The carnage and the horrors continue to resurface in parts of the Continent every now and then. Currently, this has in particular, been the tragic experience of the people of Burundi and Liberia.

The search for an end to the conflict in Burundi has undoubtedly attracted the attention and active involvement of the OAU and its Member States in the last three years. It has also enjoyed wide international support. Yet, the situation in Burundi shows no appreciable improvement. In fact it has continued to degenerate from year to year. The OAU has done and will continue to do whatever it can to prevent another human tragedy of catastrophic proportion in that country. In this connection, we attach great importance to the efforts being deployed by the former President of Tanzania Mwalimu J.K. Nyerere on Burundi. These efforts are indeed, on behalf of the OAU, the UN, the European Union and the International Community at large. We earnestly hope that these efforts will result in new dispensation to the people of Burundi. But, the people of Burundi and their leaders must recognize that the road to dialogue , mutual understanding and accommodation is the only rational path which can restore peace and security and ensure stability and development. The road of violence, killings and more killings which regrettably the international community has come to associate with developments in Burundi is a path of chaos and self-destruction.

There is nothing that has not been said by way of appealing to the leaders of Burundi to come to reason and to choose the path to dialogue. The leaders of Burundi ought to be reminded again and again that there is a limit to the understanding of the international community. As this particular anniversary of the OAU coincides with intensified efforts being made by the former President of Tanzania, Mwalimu Nyerere to promote meaningful dialogue aimed at overcoming the current impasse in Burundi, it is appropriate to once again launch a solemn appeal to the Burundi political actors to heed the message of reason and save their country from the path of self-destruction. They should bear in mind that the patience of the international community is increasingly becoming a sparse commodity.

Liberia is again hitting international headlines. This time, it is the capital Monrovia that has become a sieged city for weeks on end. As the war-lords and their factions battle for control, the people of Monrovia are once again the victims of this vicious and senseless war.

The situation in Liberia gives me particular pain, because it is one conflict which has elicited a collective and honourable response from the States in the region. ECOWAS decision to intervene in Liberia which was on the verge of disintegration, is historic, and it stands as a vivid moment

of pride for Africans. It re-kindled the hope in us that Africa, in spite of the multitude of problems that plague her, can still rise above all other considerations, in response to a challenge.

The sacrifice by ECOWAS countries deserves to be emulated by the states in the other regions. But, the sacrifice of the countries must be recognized and appreciated by the Faction Leaders in Liberia. The only fitting tribute these leaders and the people of Liberia can pay for the sacrifice being made on their behalf is the absolute commitment to and the complete implementation of the Abuja Accord; always bearing in mind that genuine and lasting leadership of Liberia can only come through the ballot box and not through the barrel of the gun. It is for this reason that we have urged and continue to urge the international community to assist ECOWAS and ECOMOG in the implementation of the Abuja Accord. It is our hope that the parties to the Accord will demonstrate a much more serious commitment in its implementation. Most immediately, it is of vital importance and urgency that a durable ceasefire be established in Monrovia and all the armed elements of the warring factions should be withdrawn from the city so that Monrovia can once again be restored to the state of safe-haven. It staggers one's imagination how these faction leaders who would like to be considered as leaders of their country can allow, and indeed, in some cases, encourage such killings, mayhem and destruction in their country's capital!

One of the clear and sad consequences of the conflicts that have plagued our Continent has been the exodus of refugees from the areas of conflicts. Hundreds of thousands of people have been voting with their feet. This has been true of West Africa primarily due to the conflict in Liberia and to some extent that of Sierra Leone. It has been equally true in the case of the conflicts which had afflicted the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa. This exodus coupled with the deteriorating socio-economic conditions in most of the Asylum countries has affected the usual traditional hospitality previously accorded to African refugees. While I understand the concern, frustration and sense of fatigue of the Asylum countries, it is nonetheless true that the new attitude towards refugees in Africa is of great concern to the OAU. It is an attitude that undermines the traditional hospitality African countries have been extending to their brothers and sisters who have fled their countries as a result of conflicts and persecution. It is a development which we must do our utmost to arrest. I am very conscious of the tremendous sacrifices made by the countries of Asylum. I fully share in their frustrations that despite all the efforts deployed and sacrifices made, conflicts which produce these refugees have in many instances continued unabated. But precisely because the overwhelming majority of the refugees who are forced to flee their countries do so for legitimate reasons of fear for their lives or intolerable persecution, Africa's sense of compassion and human solidarity which has given pride to our Continent must not be undermined. It is all the more necessary today that

African tradition of treating refugees with hospitality and of being their neighbours keeper be maintained. We must resist the temptation of intolerance as we must, with determination and uncompromising commitment, endeavour to work for resolution of the root causes of the refugees exodus. In the meantime, as we continue the noble search of ending conflicts in our Continent, I wish to solemnly appeal to all our African States to continue to show compassion and understanding so that the helpless victims of wars and persecution can continue to benefit from the human compassion and solidarity of their fellow men and women. I am making this plea for humanitarian considerations and the need to respect African and international instruments governing the protection of refugees. Above all I am making this appeal in the firm belief that the notion of African unity and solidarity must encompass our collective attachment to provide protection and solidarity to those of our brothers and sisters who are compelled, through no choice of theirs, to seek this protection in times of real danger to their lives.

Fellow Africans,

On this auspicious Africa Day as we reflect on the tragic problems of Liberia, Burundi and Somalia as well as the simmering disputes between some of our Member States, it is also relevant to take stock of some of the achievements. And these are many. I have already alluded to

the ongoing efforts at promoting economic cooperation and integration as well as the resolve of our Member states to play an increasing role in addressing conflict situations in the Continent - a role which is now being pioneered by the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. I wish, at this juncture, to refer to some of the success stories. We welcome the consolidation of the democratic processes in many of our Member States. We rejoice in the resolution of the crisis in the Comoros - in which the OAU played an important role culminating in free and fair Presidential Elections. The Elections of the new President of Sierra Leone and the continuation of the peace negotiation in Yamoussoukro and Abidjan between the Government of Sierra Leon and the Revolutionary United Front is also a matter of great satisfaction and hope. We also share in the joy of the people and Government of Mali who on March 27 this year lit the Flame of Peace in Tombouctou where weapons were destroyed by a huge bonfire symbolizing an end to a civil war and a commitment of the people of Mali to forge ahead in peace and national reconciliation. It is our sincere hope that the impact of the Flame of Peace will be felt not only in West Africa but throughout the Continent.

Fellow Africans,

As we celebrate the Thirty-third Anniversary of the founding of the OAU, we need to reflect on the basic objectives and principles upon which our continental Organization was founded.

This is the time to remind ourselves of our collective and individual commitment to the Organization. One of these commitments is promoting African unity and understanding among our peoples. This implies that we should therefore re-dedicate ourselves to the spirit of Pan-Africanism. The other commitment is that of promoting solidarity among our peoples. This unity and solidarity should be sustained by the common aspirations and demands of our people for a better life.

It is for this reason that I take advantage of this occasion to remind our leaders and people of Africa about the unfinished business of the unity and solidarity of the Continent especially at a time when all factors tend to reinforce the need for such unity and solidarity. Our Governments and people should work in partnership and in a cooperative venture whether in conflict resolution or developmental issues or towards continental unity and solidarity. We should renew our pledge to work relentlessly to promote African unity and solidarity among our peoples. We should, in this respect, bear in mind that Africa's voice has always been stronger when Africans

closed their ranks and acted in unity and cohesion. In unity we have found strength to meet the various challenges that have confronted our continent in the past. In unity we should also be able to pool our energies together to meet the new challenges facing the continent.

I thank you all.

22 May 1996

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia