



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT OF H.E. DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
OAU SECRETARY GENERAL TO THE SYMPOSIUM ON THE COMMEMORATION OF
THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ADOPTION AND THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE COMING INTO FORCE OF THE 1969 OAU CONVENTION GOVERNING
THE SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF THE REFUGEE PROBLEMS IN AFRICA**

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

8 - 10 September 1994

**Mr. Chairman,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

First, it is my pleasant duty to welcome all the participants to this Symposium, to Addis Ababa.

It is indeed an honour to have amongst us, His Excellency Pierre Buyoya, former President of Burundi and many distinguished Representatives of Governments and International Organizations as well as eminent personalities and scholars. Your rich experiences over the years and involvement with the problem of refugees and displaced persons will, I am confident, be an invaluable asset in the successful deliberations of this Symposium. On behalf of the Organization of African Unity and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the joint sponsors of this Symposium, I wish to express our deep gratitude for your presence.

Mr. Chairman,

The timing of this Symposium is most opportune for it was almost 27 years ago that the first Conference ever held on Refugees in Africa took place here in Addis Ababa. That Conference, which was held in October 1967 and was co-sponsored by the OAU, UNHCR, ECA and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, focussed attention on the need for maintaining educational schemes for refugees and on the legal, economic and social aspects of the problem of African refugees. It set up the institutional framework for assisting in the solution of the refugee problem and for its monitoring.

The 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problems in Africa was the direct product of the very serious and useful deliberations of the Conference.

Since September 1969 many developments have taken place as far as the African refugee situation is concerned. Indeed over the past 25 years, the problems of Africa's refugees and displaced persons have increased so rapidly and have become so complex that there is now a growing concern throughout the continent as to how to arrest the trend and reverse it.

Mr. Chairman,

The history of the root causes of the African refugee problem is very well known and there is no need to elaborate on this as this Symposium will be considering the problem in greater detail. However, it is important to note that refugees have one thing in common: that they have fled from their country of origin. The causes of their flight may be different. It may be because of war, persecution, social upheaval or it may be famine. The refugees are usually, but not quite always without property. They will be of many different cultures. They may be nomadic, rural or urban workers or even senior officials and Ministers. All of them are individuals with a right to life and asylum. All need a chance to recreate their lives and to regain the dignity of being human beings.

Mr. Chairman,

Africa is the continent with the largest numbers of refugees and displaced persons. But in no other continent are refugees received with greater generosity of spirit, or understanding of their predicament. No other continent has been so generous with its welcome and resources even as the problem has inexorably gotten worse over the years.

Throughout the past decade, African countries have shown enormous generosity in granting asylum to refugees and in sharing their scarce resources with those in need. They have provided land, education, employment, health and other relevant services to enable the refugees to support themselves.

While the refugees have greatly benefitted from the generosity of the countries of exiles over the years, increasingly, we are seeing symptoms of hospitality fatigue. This is not because the generosity of the Africans towards their brothers and sisters seeking asylum is in any way diminished. Rather it is because the burden of that generosity is becoming heavier and the means of sustaining it are diminishing. This therefore means that if the receiving countries are to continue with their traditional hospitality, the International Community, must also look at how they can be assisted as well in terms of augmenting their capacity or mitigating the negative effects consequent from being asylum centres. Ironically as it may sound, it has happened that sometimes the refugee camps look as islands of relative

prosperity in a sea of misery brought about in part by the very refugees themselves. What is needed is to ensure that just as the refugees share that which is of their hosts, the receiving populations too must be made to benefit from the aid and facilities which the international community places at the disposal of those refugees.

When I speak of the negative consequence of hosting refugees, I also refer to the devastation, to the environment and ecology which the host countries suffer as refugees foliage for firewood causing instant deforestation in some cases. The long term effect of this, in terms of ecological destruction and food production is quite enormous and will still be with the countries of asylum even long after the refugees will have been repatriated. Hosting refugees for whom no contingency plans can be made, means also sharing the food, land and water resources, sometimes, in instances, where these are very limited. This creates immense social and economic pressures within the receiving societies - which pressure is not always appreciated and for which the aid organizations make little allowance. The tendency is too often to look at refugees, as if their existence is in isolation and without relevance to the society and socio-economic conditions prevailing in their places of asylum. We have seen cases where medical facilities for example are available to the refugees and not easily accessed by the asylum communities. What we should be looking at here is how the two communities - that of the refugees and of the receiving countries can find symbiosis and be mutually supportive - helping each other and benefitting from each other. Likewise, we should see how the intervention of the

International Community can promote that mutualism rather than create differences or divisions.

Mr. Chairman,

I know of the mandate of the UNHCR and the limitations which this places on its field operations especially those which extend to the realm of politics. The founders of the High Commission clearly knew too well that keeping its work focussed on humanitarian work, would keep it free from political encumbrances and the attendant controversies. This position has served the Commission well over the years and it has made great contribution to the alleviation of human suffering by being there, at the frontline and dealing with the refugee problem. Yet, over the years, you will agree with me, experience has shown that ultimately, one can not deal with the refugee problem in isolation of the context within which those refugees are generated and exist. Providing humanitarian relief, be it food, shelter and medicine, bears directly to the fundamentals of the problem - and inexorably extends into the realm of politics - even if marginally.

I hold the view that the problem of refugees and displaced persons is a continuum - stretching from the factors that generate them, to relief and humanitarian assistance and ultimately into repatriation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. It is therefore imperative that a comprehensive policy of dealing with this problem also be correlated to this continuum. I am aware of the legislative limitations of the institutions like UNHCR in terms of getting directly involved. But these limitations notwithstanding, I

see clear opportunity presenting itself whereby these institutions can enter into creative partnership with organizations like the OAU, and through this collaboration to sustain a momentum of peace making, peace keeping and peace building. In so doing, we shall be mounting concerted and collaborative action which bears directly to the question of refugees. When I speak of a creative partnership, I do not envisage a UNHCR or WFP direct involvement in political negotiations, peace observation or peace-keeping. Rather, I see these and other institutions bringing support to the work of the OAU in the field such as in terms of logistics and human resources. Already, we have a working demonstration with UNHCR of the kind of collaboration I am speaking of in the OAU operations in Burundi. This collaboration can be expanded, in order to augment the capacity of the OAU to carry out field operations aimed at peace-making and peace-building - both which are directly linked to the problem of refugees and displaced persons. I therefore hope that this Symposium also provides opportunity to deliberate on the creative partnership I am speaking about and how this can be efficiently put to use in tackling this seemingly endemic human tragedy in our continent.

Mr. Chairman,

Of course, the person who is uprooted and forced to cross borders and to settle in a foreign land as a refugee, has attracted the greatest attention. This is because the scale of the exodus of refugees has been dramatic and the fact of going outside their countries attracted greater sympathy from the international community. Besides, the effects of these

migrations to the recipient States has made them ready sources of concern, and the world has rightly devoted energy, time and resources. Yet there are, particularly in Africa, the silent millions, whose suffering is not fully documented but whose fate, in substance, is no different from that of the refugees. I am speaking of the internally displaced persons who are affected by actual or man-made disasters, and lose their homes, their loved ones and means of livelihood. They move to new areas and settle in camps, whose conditions are often worse as they do not benefit from the hospitality of receiving States or from the international attention which is accorded to the refugees. Invariably the relief programmes, even those of eventual repatriation do not take into full account the plight of those internally displaced. There is therefore need to have a comprehensive policy and to extend the full benefits of relief and humanitarian assistance to the internally displaced. This is all the more urgent and necessary, considering that in Africa, the phenomenon of the internally displaced is rising and their numbers now surpass those of refugees. This policy must not only consist in those displaced accessing the facilities of the aid organizations but more critically, in expediting their repatriation to their homes and being assisted in the tasks of resettlement and rebuilding. This is possible, considering that after a crisis and particularly in a post conflict situation, those internally displaced render themselves readily repatriable because of the lesser consideration of politics. Accent should therefore be put on assisting these to go back home and re-establish themselves.

Mr. Chairman,

Twenty five years ago when the African Convention on Refugees was adopted, it was in different socio-economic and political circumstances. The numbers were much lower and obviously the problems less complex.

Today, we have seen how that Convention has been applied not only in terms of ensuring relief and humanitarian assistance, but more fundamentally in terms of securing the rights and obligations of the refugees as well as those of the asylum countries and people. Needless to say, it has not been a perfect situation. The burden of harbouring refugees had its own effect in terms of how the problem is viewed and dealt with. We have seen unilateralism on the part of some countries, as refugees have presented ready and expedient political excuses for politicians. We have seen frictions between refugees and recipient populations as sharing of diminishing resources has become more difficult. We have also witnessed frustrations as those refugees who were initially welcomed, supposedly for a few weeks or months, have stayed on and bore children who have presented new problems. All these have been problems of application of the Convention. I therefore also hope that we shall, during the next day or so, try to examine these and other related problems and see how adjustments can be made so as to balance rights and obligations. But beyond adjustments, we should also see how the States signatory to the Convention relating to the refugees, can be encouraged to fully implement the provisions of those instruments. Equally, in the balancing of those

rights and obligations, we should see how the refugees can be encouraged to desist from acts inconsistent with their status of refugees.

Mr. Chairman,

Beyond the consideration of how to assist the refugees and those displaced, I am also of the view that this symposium should also look into the whole issue of the root causes of the problem. When I say so, I am fully conscious of the fact that we all know what lies at the genesis of the refugee problem. Studies have been done, and there is general consensus of those factors which drive the engine that produces refugees. Yet, this said, I still think that as our societies evolve, new problems emerge and new factors present themselves. It is not only famine, drought, or wars which produce refugees. We have a new and emerging phenomenon, now for the first time in Africa, of those driven out of their countries by economic deprivation and thus the search for new economic opportunities. With the demise of Apartheid, and the movement towards greater integration and the consequent opening of borders, we are bound to see migrations from economically depressed areas to those relatively better off. This is bound to cause social and political tensions as people compete for limited resources. This new phenomenon, as well as others which experts may have observed, need to be closely looked at and their implication to the refugee problem on the continent fully assessed.

In addition, as Africa is going through political and economic transition, there is bound to be some turbulence which if not properly managed, can degenerate into conflict and produce refugees. It thus means, that as an insurance against the generation of refugees, we should look at how our countries are grappling with the vexing task of managing the transition. It is my view also, that if Africa is assisted during this critical period of transition to manage change, great contribution will have been done in safeguarding the security and stability of the continent - both key to the strategy of putting an end to the problem of refugees.

Mr. Chairman,

Managing the transition in the continent, is critical to the comprehensive strategy of building peace and consolidating stability. Ultimately, a definitive solution to the problem of refugees will hinge on the elaboration of national mechanisms which ensure equity and justice in our countries. Once people are not threatened or marginalized, once they have full access to the due process of the law and to opportunity; Once they feel included and participate in the political governance of their country, once they are confident that the country holds promise and a future for them and their children; and above all once they feel safe, the people will not herd themselves into camps as refugees living a life without hope in a foreign land.

To us in the OAU, a fundamental element in the management of change in Africa, is the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts - within and between States. We

consider this task central because everything else depends on it. We can not develop; promote democracy or ensure the promotion of human rights in conditions of conflict and war. Today, we can not speak of these ideals in Angola, Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda or Burundi for example.

It is because of this fundamental belief that peace and stability are determinants of everything else that the OAU Heads of State and Government decided last year to create within the OAU, a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution! The overriding objective of the mechanism is to put at the disposal of Africa an institutional framework within which its problems can be considered and resolved. The mechanism is both an empowering step and a political statement that Africa is now more than ever resolved to take the challenge and place itself at the centre of all efforts at resolving its conflicts.

Already we are seeing what this determination has produced. During the last year, we have been able to put the mechanism on stream and through it, we have been able to contribute in real ways, in the search for solutions to a number of conflicts in Africa. We could, I am sure, benefit from the experiences of the participants of this Symposium in this regard.

Mr. Chairman,

We are gathered here from all the Member States of the OAU and the UNHCR Executive Committee as well as from International Organizations. We have a unique opportunity in the coming two days to be compassionate, creative and to formulate practical recommendations for the benefit of refugees and displaced persons. We must pool our experience together in the name of human dignity. I hope the participants to this Symposium will rise to the challenge.

I would like to use this opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude to the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees for co-sponsoring this Symposium together with the OAU. Let me also pay tribute to all the donor countries, UN Agencies and Voluntary Organizations for the support they have given and continue to give to asylum countries. Without their assistance it would have been more difficult for the countries of asylum to meet their responsibilities of assisting the refugees.

I thank you.