

Dinner Speech by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim  
on the Occasion of the first meeting of  
the PAIP/PCAP Advisory Board,  
Paris, Tuesday, January 25, 2005

**"Challenges and Opportunities facing Africa Today"**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here with you this evening at the dinner organized on the occasion of the first meeting of the Advisory Board of Pan-African Investment Partners and Pan-Commonwealth African partners.

Runa Alam has asked me to make some remarks about Africa since the thrust of our activities is on that continent. Given the limitation of time, I shall endeavor to be brief. These remarks will be based on my experience

and active involvement in the continent's affairs for a period of twelve years as the Secretary General of the then Organization of African Unity and now the African Union and reinforced by the experience gained as I most recently served together with fifteen other colleagues in the UN Secretary General's blue ribbon on Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.

Rather than speak to you on a particular topic concerning the African continent, I have chosen to give a general overview of how I see the continent, its problems and shortcomings, its challenges and opportunities. It is however important to stress at the very outset that Africa is composed of 54 countries with a rich diversity and moving in different tempo. It is a bit too risky to generalize. At the same time, the Continent is not an island

unto itself. What happens in the rest of the world has an impact – either positive or negative to the Continent. Thus we cannot discuss events and/or developments in the African continent in isolation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I completed my third term as the Secretary General of the Continental Organization in September 2001. I was privileged to witness during that last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Africa entering into a phase of profound transformation. A Continent was evolving with a full endeavour to be at peace with itself, to realize the collective vision of her people, and to take its rightful position in the global arena.

Africa entered the new century and a new millennium having successfully made a dent on some of the most recalcitrant conflicts, some of which have ravaged and created devastation for more than two and half decades. From a Continent notoriously renown for genocide and rampaging conflict, gradually we were beginning to witness the dawn of peace and tranquility in Angola, Southern Sudan, the Congo and even Somalia. Furthermore, a new culture was growing in the Continent. A culture that eschewed unconstitutional changes of government and one that promoted democratic governance and the rule of law.

Indeed, the process of democratization and good governance has taken a strong foothold in the continent and is on the march and in my opinion is irreversible. More and more African states have embarked on the path of

transparency and accountability, and thanks to the growing role of the civil society, respect for human rights is becoming increasingly the rule rather than the exception. Furthermore, African leaders are today in the forefront in tackling African conflicts and finding African solutions to African problems.

I am confident that the trajectory of peace will sustain and that the vision of creating an environment of peace, security and stability; and unleashing the immense energies and potential of the Continent will soon be realized.

It is difficult to understand the basis of pessimism sometimes associated with the African Continent. For, this Continent with 54 countries and almost a billion people has not all and always been chaotic and unstable as it is

often portrayed to be. Africa is not just about Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia or Cote D'Ivoire, and yet, even in these situations considerable efforts have been made and with some success to change the situation for the better. A major part of Africa has been involved, especially during the last two decades in fundamental political and institutional reforms to construct structures of pluralism, liberalization and to allow for an effective functioning of the market.

The majority of African countries have created the climate and established the requisite institutions and framework for doing business. They are ideal for investment by the private sector and experience has demonstrated that such investments result in quick and very attractive returns. In this context the role of PAIP/PCAP is both timely and most welcome.



On the aspect of economic reforms, it is encouraging to see once again, the Continent embarking into a dynamic path of integration. Economic cooperation and integration is pursued in earnest in many of our countries and regions. Just with reference to my own sub-region, only last month an East African Customs Union has been launched and a road map towards building a market of close to 100 million consumers has been embarked upon. In all this, the newly established African Union is taking the lead and is receiving the valuable support of friends of Africa from different parts of the world and the international community at large. As the continent proceeds on this path, it is imperative that this support is enhanced and a fairer and more just international system is established.

Yet, together with the unfolding promising scenario, the Continent is still bedeviled by a number of challenges. Darfur, Cote d'Ivoire and Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo continue to remind us that we are not yet out of the woods. In some African countries we still face the crisis of governance with violations of human rights. Both these developments have resulted in the outpouring of refugees and displaced persons. Similarly, Africa's position in world trade has not improved.

The Continent's share of world trade has halved within 2 decades of 1980 – 2000, and now stands at less than one percent. Both exports and imports have declined in value due to lower and declining commodity prices. The resultant increases in the balance of payments deficits coupled with the external debt, have limited the ability of African countries to import more



capital for development and other goods for consumption. The fact of the matter is that world market prices for commodities exported by Africa have been declining steadily over the last decade. This means that, even if Africa keeps on exporting more and more coffee, tea, cocoa, vegetable oils or copper, it will still earn less and less. Meanwhile, the prices for machinery and other manufactured goods from the industrial nations have risen sharply for Africa, largely because African currencies have been losing their value against the strong currencies of the west and price adjustments in the North. In addition, inflation in these countries have aggravated the situation.

With the AIDS pandemic ravaging throughout the world, Africa bears the brunt and more than 12 million children in our continent have been made

orphans. Above all, Africa has still the dubious and anachronistic situation of being one of the richest continents in terms of resources both human and material yet with the poorest people in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are challenging times for the world. We live in an era of unparalleled opportunities thanks to the advancement of science and technology. Information communication technology has drastically and dramatically reduced the distance that for decades had separated us. Globalization has opened new vistas in Trade and development but it has also, at least for the present, created enormous problems for many developing countries and especially those in Africa. At the same time, it

has also provided immense possibilities for the forces of evil as manifested by the exploitation of this phenomenon to promote more organized crime and international terrorism. To confront and overcome these negative and dangerous forces, the world needs to act in greater harmony, solidarity, unity and cohesion.

Our world is characterized as a Global Village. But we have yet to live in a true spirit of a village whose essential characteristics include caring, compassion and human solidarity. We need to discard once and for all the illusion that peace and stability is sustainable in a situation where hundreds of millions of people live in abject poverty and squalor. Furthermore we need to dispense with the notion that any one nation or a coalition of nations however powerful can unilaterally decide the destiny of the rest of

humanity. Whether we deal with man-made disasters like wars between or within states or natural disasters like the Tsunami catastrophe or for that matter the burning issues of fighting poverty and pandemic diseases like HIV-AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, we have to act collectively.

There is a need to take genuine interdependence with its corollary of cooperation in all spheres of human endeavor seriously. Such need is all the more urgent in dealing with the continent of Africa. This is the continent that has been repeatedly described as the continent of the future. I put it to you that the current leadership in Africa together with all the stakeholders are determined to make it the continent of the present. It can and should be done.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Tsunami catastrophe has demonstrated at least two things. First a catastrophic calamity happening in one place can have far reaching repercussions much beyond the place where such an event has taken place. The earthquake that had erupted in Indonesia had devastating consequences not only in Indonesia but also in Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and up to East Africa and especially in Somalia. This serves to reinforce the reality of how interdependent and interlinked our world is.

Secondly, it has also served to eloquently demonstrate the degree of human compassion that exists as witnessed by the outpouring of not only grief in almost all our countries but also the generosity of people of both



the developed and developing world coming to the aid of the victims of this horrendous natural disaster. We need and must draw appropriate conclusions from this and reinforce our human solidarity. Africa, with its myriad of problems and crises – both man-made and natural is most deserving of this solidarity. It is my sincere hope and expectation that the world would not wait for another Tsunami or another Rwanda before acting decisively and generously to contribute to the upliftment and betterment of the conditions of those who are entitled to live in more decent and sustainable conditions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is no doubt that Africa has faced and still continues to face formidable political, economic and social problems but these are not insurmountable. With the on going efforts aimed at creating an enabling political environment, proper planning and foresight, Africa can and must move ahead towards significant economic and social development. What is required is the will, imagination and determination to succeed. Africa has the resources to do so. The support of the world community would be invaluable in facilitating the required changes and movement forward. In the words of President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, "*This 21<sup>st</sup> Century should be Africa's Century*".

I thank you for your kind attention.