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Organization of African Unity

**Statement by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,  
Secretary General of the OAU, at the First  
Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention  
On the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling,  
Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel  
Mines and on their Destruction**

Maputo, Mozambique  
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Mr. Chairman,

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Government of Mozambique for the invitation extended to me to attend this First Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on their Destruction. I wish also to express my gratitude to the Government of Mozambique for hosting this important meeting on Landmines. Indeed, the fact that this meeting is being held in this country which went through a devastating conflict and whose people experienced, and are still experiencing, the tragic consequences of anti-personnel mines is highly significant and symbolic.

This is the opportunity for me to once again pay tribute to the leadership and the people of this country for the courage and determination they have demonstrated to rise above the destructive logic of war

and division, and forge a new dispensation based on tolerance, accommodation and reconciliation through negotiation and dialogue. Today, thanks to the vision of its leadership, Mozambique is addressing with serenity the legacy of armed conflict, including in particular the hundreds of thousands of mines which continue to claim innocent lives at a time this Country should be enjoying fully the peace which was achieved after enormous sacrifices.

I wish in this regard to salute President Chissano for his exemplary leadership and for steering his country through an unfortunate and turbulent past, to a new area of peace and hope. The achievement of Mozambique clearly demonstrates that peace is within our reach for as long as there is the necessary political will and commitment.

It is also symbolic that this First Meeting of the States Parties to the Ottawa Treaty is being held in Southern Africa, a region that has been severely affected by landmines. Indeed, according to some statistics, this region alone has about 20 million mines, deployed in different areas and which have claimed over 250,000 victims since 1961. It is, therefore, not surprising that the countries of the region have been in the forefront of the struggle to ban anti-personnel mines in the world.

Anti-personnel mines do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. They simply kill or maim people, including in particular women and children. Mines continue to cause havoc and destruction long after peace agreements have been signed. They constitute a definite impediment to socio-economic development and reconstruction efforts. They also have a negative impact on the environment. They hinder the return of refugees and displaced

persons to their homes, and complicate the post conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation initiatives, thereby affecting adversely peace-building efforts. In short, an anti-personnel mine is a weapon whose human, social, economic and political costs completely outweighs its military usefulness.

On the occasion of this first meeting of the States Parties, I would like, on behalf of the OAU, to express our deep gratitude to all those who, from different parts of the world, came together and contributed to the efforts to increase awareness on the magnitude of the crisis caused by landmines and the adoption of an instrument which, for the first time in the history of International Humanitarian Law, bans a weapon whose use is so widespread. I wish in particular to pay tribute to the promoters of the Ottawa Process, particularly the Government of Canada and its distinguished Foreign Minister as well as the NGOs, which have been working

in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, for the tremendous efforts they have deployed.

The unflinching commitment of the promoters of the Ottawa Treaty is a gesture of solidarity and a source of hope, which we highly appreciate. We encourage them to persevere in their efforts, because their continued commitment will be crucial in sustaining the momentum generated by the Ottawa Process and help in the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty, particularly the ban on the use of mines, the end to the production, development and transfer of anti-personnel mines, the destruction of stockpiles and also the mobilization of the necessary resources for mine clearance operations and assistance to the victims.

We are all familiar with the magnitude of the problem of anti-personnel mines in Africa. Our Continent has the sad record of having about one third of the total number of mines laid in the world. More

than 20 African countries face, in varying degrees, this scourge for which our peoples are paying a very high price.

This situation led the Organization of African Unity to focus its attention on the problems posed by the proliferation of anti-personnel mines. It has repeatedly condemned the flagrant violation of International Humanitarian Law by the indiscriminate use of anti-personnel mines and pronounced itself in favour of the total ban on this weapon. The Council reiterated this position in February 1996, when it requested Sub-regional organizations to take at their level, the appropriate initiatives aimed at banning anti-personnel mines as a way of buttressing the efforts of the International community and the OAU in this area. Again, in July 1996, the OAU Council of Ministers stressed the need for Member States to adopt national measures to ban anti-personnel mines.

As part of these efforts by the OAU, a Continental Conference of African Experts on Anti-personnel Mines was held in South Africa, in May 1997. This Conference adopted a Plan of Action aimed at eliminating all anti-personnel mines and the establishment of a Landmine Free Zone in Africa. This Conference offered OAU Member States a unique platform for re-committing themselves to the cause of the banning of landmines. This commitment was subsequently demonstrated through the active involvement of OAU Member States in the Ottawa Process, which led to the signing of the Ottawa Treaty.

Since then, many initiatives have been taken to speed up the process of the ratification of, or accession to the Ottawa Treaty by the Member States. Immediately after the signing of the Treaty, in my capacity as Secretary General of the OAU, I requested OAU Member States to take all the necessary measures to become, as soon as possible, parties to the Treaty. I

also urged those Member States affected by the scourge of landmines to formulate projects in the area of mine clearance and assistance to victims in order to take advantage of the good will which exists within the International Community to address this problem. I was particularly encouraged by the responses I received, which constitute a further testimony to the commitment of our Member States to a Landmine Free Africa.

As I address you today, more than two third of OAU Member States have signed the Ottawa Treaty while 18 OAU Member States, out of a total of 76 countries throughout the world are parties to the Treaty. Three African countries have announced the destruction of all their stockpiles. In spite of this progress, however, I must underscore the fact that there is still a long way to go to attain the objective of a landmine free Africa.

It is, therefore, imperative that those African countries, which have not yet done so, should endeavour to become parties to the Ottawa Treaty. Indeed, it is important that Africa continues to be in the forefront of the struggle against landmines.

In this connection, it is regrettable to note that, in spite of the considerable efforts by Africa and the rest of the International community to rid the world of this deadly weapon, there are reports of the continued use of anti-personnel mines on the Continent. I wish to reiterate my strong appeal to all concerned to immediately put an end to this practice and clearly commit themselves to our common goal of a Landmine Free Africa.

We, at the OAU, remain committed to the objectives enshrined in the Ottawa Treaty and we shall do whatever is within our means to sensitize our Member States and play an advocacy role in promoting these important goals.

We believe, however, that this challenge requires the support of the International Community. Indeed, it is important that the International Community continues to assume its full responsibility in this endeavour. We are grateful to all those who have made valuable financial and material contributions to demining operations and assistance to the victims in our Continent. We have noted with interest the various initiatives already undertaken or being planned to mobilize further resources and technical assistance.

I wish to seize this opportunity to reiterate here our concern at the fact that as long as some important countries remain outside the Treaty, and mines

continue to be produced in some parts of the world and stockpiled, the risk and temptation of deploying them will always exist. This is why we would like to appeal to all those countries who have not yet signed the Ottawa Treaty to join our efforts to rid the world of these deadly weapons.

As we are about to enter into the new millennium, hopefully in greater solidarity, what greater legacy can we bequeath to future generations than a world where our children will be able to walk and play in the fields without any fear, a world where our peasants will be able to work safely the soil to feed their societies. I am persuaded that we can together achieve, a safer world devoid of these silent killers.

I thank you.