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Organization of African Unity

Address by H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary

General of the OAU To The International

Conference on Africa:

Africa at 40

London, Wednesday, 29th October, 1997

- **Mr. Chairman,**
- **Chief Emeka Anyaoku,
Commonwealth Secretary General,**
- **Secretary of State for
Foreign Affairs of Tunisia,**
- **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I should like, from the outset, to say how delighted and honoured I am to have been invited to participate in this important conference devoted to Africa. I wish to thank most sincerely the organizing Committee and especially the Coordinator, Ad'Obe Obe of this conference for the timely initiative taken in order to afford Africans and the friends of Africa the opportunity to reflect on the last forty years of Africa's independence.

The venue of the conference is historically quite significant. It was, indeed, in this very city that the First Pan-African Congress was held seventy years ago in 1919. That particular conference set the stage for the struggle of the African peoples for political liberation and economic emancipation.

In my view, this conference should provide us with an opportunity to pay tribute to the great Pan-Africanists Movement which culminated in the historic foundation of the OAU on 25 May, 1963 in Addis Ababa. In this regard, I consider this conference as the appropriate forum to pay homage to the efforts of great Pan-Africanists both in Africa and in the diaspora as well as the Founding Fathers of our continental organization who were, indeed, the building blocs on which our ideals and dreams of African Unity currently stand.

As we meet here today, it is pertinent to review the long march of our people towards political liberation and economic emancipation since independence and to take stock of the efforts and achievements of our Continent as well as the shortcomings that were experienced in the process. It was a period when the majority of our countries were emerging from colonial rule against the background of centuries of exploitation and slavery. It was a period for the recovery of the dignity and pride, after the humiliation and deprivation imposed on our people. Over the last forty years, our Continent has been faced with the challenge of nation-building and forging unity amongst our people and the cohesion of our societies which had been torn apart during the colonial period.

Our countries have also been faced with the challenge of socio-economic development and addressing the poverty and misery prevailing in our Continent. Despite these difficulties, Africa has been able to achieve significant social progress. Many of our countries have made considerable progress in improving the living conditions of their people, providing improved health and education facilities as well as basic infrastructures, such as roads, airports, schools and hospitals. Educated Africans, including doctors, engineers, scientists and other intellectuals of international standard have emerged in our Continent. Beyond efforts at national level, African countries have also endeavoured to formulate continental plans and programmes of action to achieve national and collective reliance and socio-economic development through integration and cooperation.

However, despite this progress, the situation in our Continent has remained fragile. In some cases, dictatorial systems which have had the effect of suffocating the energies and resources of our people have contributed to this. In other instances, wrong policies and questionable priorities have had devastating effect. Furthermore, the conditions in our Continent were made more difficult by a hostile international environment characterized by the tension and competition prevailing between the then two major contending political and military blocs. Our Continent was not immune from external pressures and interferences.

Clearly, this conference is being held in very particular circumstances at a time when the cold war is over and when we are about to enter the millennium. This is the time when Africa like the other continents is preparing itself to meet the next millennium in better conditions. This is, therefore, the time for hope and expectations. For our Continent and our people it is also an opportune time for reflection and critical self-analysis so that we may learn from the mistakes and shortcomings of the past and prepare ourselves adequately to confront the challenges and make effective use of the opportunities that the new millennium has to offer. Clearly, among those challenges is the need to overcome the present anachronism whereby a Continent which is endowed with formidable resources both human and material, has a vast majority of its people living in abject poverty and deprivation.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we prepare to usher the Continent into the next millennium, democracy and good governance has assumed greater prominence in the agenda of the OAU and in Member States of the Organization. It is on this basis that, we at the OAU, are convinced that Africa at 40 must be an Africa of democracy. A continent which has resolutely decided to move ahead with the agenda of building sustainable peace, security and stability

on the Continent. Such an agenda should be predicated upon the promotion of democracy and good governance, the protection of human rights and rule of law as well as the development of a culture of peace and tolerance and national reconciliation. Indeed, I believe that the main objective of the long and fierce struggle to liberate our people from the yoke of colonialism would be undermined if we fail to establish governments that are responsive to the aspirations of their people.

The issue of democratization and good governance has been on the OAU's agenda for the last several years. In the process, we have endeavoured to promote these objectives within the limits of our resources and capacity. In this regard, we have been encouraged by the growing recognition by our Member States that the roots of economic development and political stability must be planted in good and responsive governance. Indeed, contrary to the impressions that many have created, that the process of democratization has been imposed on African countries, it is a fact that the efforts to create more humane societies on our Continent, have been the logical outcome of the long yearning of our people, demonstrated during the era of the anti-colonial struggle, to have more say in determining how they should be governed and by whom. Democracy in Africa, in spite of a few setbacks here and there, is surely taking root. And we continue to look at the larger picture involving the process of good governance and participatory democracy in the entire continent.

In this endeavour, we, at the OAU, have been working on the assumption that while the fundamental principles of democracy and good governance are universal, their application vary from country to country. On this understanding, countries are entitled to pursue the goals and objectives of a democratic disposition on the basis of their socio-cultural values, taking into account their specific realities. Indeed, the dimension of cultural values and historical experiences are relevant in the application and consideration of democracy in our societies. Africans like peoples anywhere else in the world, aspire for liberty, human dignity, equity and socio-economic progress. But, while there are universal values which are the common heritage of humanity, there are no ready made recipes for democracy and governance. Each society should generate its home grown modalities for forging ahead in democracy and good governance on the basis of universally recognized principles.

We, at the OAU consider Governance as the totality of the exercise of authority in the management of a country's affairs comprising of the complex mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights and mediate their differences. In building good governance, we also need to address some misconceptions of democracy within and outside the Continent. Democracy has often been understood as the participation of the people in electing a government of their choice through the ballot box.

Elections are, indeed, a crucial stage in a democratic process. This is why the OAU has participated in the observation of over 60 elections in our Member States. But, while elections are necessary, they, by themselves do not provide sufficient condition for the building of democracy and good governance. Elections *per se* are not the panacea for sustainable democracy and good governance. In other words, the existence of a multiplicity of political parties, the conduct of free and fair elections and the performance of Parliament under the leadership of an elected government crucial as they are - do not always turn governance into a democratic system.

Perhaps more critical than the electoral process, which we consider to be vital, is the need to build viable institutions to sustain democracy and promote good governance. In this respect, we need to take into account, specific factors related to the building of Governments in Africa. One of these factors is the need to strengthen the quality of leadership so as to ensure the promotion of people centred decision-making process. This, of course, calls for greater transparency in decision-making as well as accountability. Our leaders must continue to place national interest before self or group interest. Power must not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means to promote the wider interests of people. But, more critically, power must be vested in the people and not in their leaders. Political power must be discharged with a deep sense of responsibility for

the well being and interest of the people. We should remember the famous tenet according to which power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Over the last years, the issue of human rights has increasingly become an important factor in the political life of our countries as democratization processes gain momentum in Africa. It is encouraging that our countries have gradually recognized that the process of democratization goes hand in hand with the observance of human rights. Indeed, in many of our countries, national institutions dealing with promotion and protection of human rights have been established and are gaining experience and credibility.

Indeed, Africa has more reasons than any other continent to promote, protect and safeguard human rights. Africa gravely suffered and was traumatized by all kinds of indignities and human rights abuses, from slavery to colonialism and during the apartheid era. Now that we are in control of our political destiny we must be, and be seen to be, in the forefront in the defence of the principles of liberty, equality, justice and human dignity. In this context, institutionally, we have done the right things.

All African States are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, our countries are also parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Yet, regrettably, and notwithstanding the progress attained by many of our countries, the fact remains that violations of human rights - in some cases on a massive scale - continue to occur in some parts of our Continent. In the interest of our people and in fidelity to the Human Rights Instruments which our countries have subscribed to, it is imperative that we put an end to these violations and ensure the observance, promotion and protection of human rights in all our countries. To achieve this objective, we need to build a partnership that brings together governments, non-governmental organizations and individuals.

On the socio-economic front, African countries have embarked on programmes of economic reform and adjustment aimed at creating conditions for accelerated economic transformation and development and integrating their economies fully into the global system. It is important that the efforts and sacrifices made by most of our countries in carrying out reforms were adequately appreciated by our partners within the international community. Indeed, these reforms have brought a series of additional problems to our countries, such as severe unemployment and drastic cuts in expenditures on social services which have contributed to exacerbating tension within our societies and making the task of governments more

complicated. This situation has been further aggravated by the unbearable burden of the external debt of most of our countries. Clearly, greater international understanding and support is needed for the efforts in addressing this crippling problem affecting African economies. This is specially relevant bearing in mind, that due to debt servicing obligations, there has been a net outflow of resources from African countries to the outside world rather than vice versa.

At the continental level, African countries are striving to pool their resources and energies with a view to promoting integration and establishing the African Economic Community as the most viable framework for collective survival in the new highly competitive globalized economy. It is within this context of solidarity and cooperation provided by the African Economic Community that African States are also addressing the various socio-economic problems confronting our Continent.

On the political front, our Member States are showing greater determination in addressing the critical problem of conflicts in our Continent. Efforts are being deployed at the national, regional and continental levels to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts. Since 1993, African leaders have provided our continental Organization with a unique instrument for peace in establishing, within the OAU, a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution. Indeed, in doing so,

African leaders were conscious of the fact that no meaningful economic development can be achieved in our Continent in an environment devoid of peace, security and stability. They were equally aware of the fact that peace cannot be sustained in our Continent if it is not supported by economic growth and development.

Unfortunately, despite these efforts, some of our countries are still afflicted with conflicts. It is therefore not surprising that the issue of conflicts in our Continent has become a major, indeed, central preoccupation. Undoubtedly, the consequences of conflict in our region undermine our strive to move our Continent with confidence towards the next millennium. These conflicts negate the gains made by the Founding Fathers of our Organization in the promotion of Pan-Africanism and African solidarity. Yet it is this same solidarity that we must depend for solution to the scourge of conflicts in our region. Africa must not only take charge of its destiny out of the sense of obligation but out of a clear recognition that these conflicts undermine our very dignity as humane and peace loving people. At the same time we have not only an obligation and a responsibility to protect our children from the impact of conflicts but also to ensure that they are not in any way drawn into the conflicts, the causes of which they are often ignorant.

Conflicts are causing unnecessary suffering, loss of lives and destruction in our Continent. They engender hatred and a culture of violence within our societies. They traumatize generations of Africans and undermine the very fabric of our societies. They affect the most productive section of our societies and jeopardize the chances of African children to have a decent and dignified life. Conflicts also provide a pretext for the use of anti-personnel mines with their devastating and far-reaching effects; they produce orphans and armed children and constitute a serious obstacle to socio-economic endeavours.

Conflicts remain, by and large, the main root cause of humanitarian tragedies in our Continent which hosts the largest number of refugees and displaced persons in the world. As a result of the unbearable burden created by the massive influx of refugees to countries of asylum, the environmental degradation generated and the frustrations and resentment raised among local populations, there has been, a decline in the traditional African compassion and hospitality towards refugees. This has been exacerbated by the eruption of the phenomenon of armed refugees.

It is important to bear these factors in mind as the international community addresses refugees problems and recurring humanitarian crisis. We must affirm the need for compassion and respect for humanitarian principles including the principles of asylum and non-refoulment. But as we

do so, we must not only strive towards the elimination of the root causes of these humanitarian crisis but also address the legitimate problems and concerns of the countries of asylum.

In order to address the problem of refugees and displaced persons appropriately, we need to support the processes of post-conflict recovery in countries of origin, with a view to ensuring the sustainability of the reintegration process of returnees and displaced persons. But most importantly, we need to look into the root causes and cycle of conflicts in the region, so as to prevent their recurrence and breaking the vicious circle of violence which most often are caused by insecurity, political instability and competition for scarce resources. Additionally, there is a need for increased international support for institutional and general capacity-building in Africa, to ensure that the countries of the Continent can respond in a more effective manner, to the humanitarian and refugee crisis that may occur in the future.

As I have stated before, Africa is more determined than ever before to seriously address the scourge of conflicts afflicting our Continent through the use of its continental mechanism and other arrangements. As part of this renewed determination to assume its share of responsibility in maintaining peace, security and stability in the Continent, Africa is committed to develop its conflict prevention capacity through the

establishment of an Early Warning System and to enhance its peace-keeping capacity. It is clear, however, that the main responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in Africa, as is the case for other regions of the world, lies with the United Nations Security Council. That is why we, in the OAU strongly, believe that we need to build a real partnership between Africa and the rest of the world in addressing conflict situations in the Continent. Through such partnership, we should be able not only to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts, but also to pool our resources together in dealing with post-conflict situations, which is crucial in ensuring sustained peace in our Continent.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We, at the OAU, are convinced that contrary to the stereotypes that are often associated with Africa and Africans, there is, indeed, nothing fundamentally wrong with the continent. Ours is a big vibrant continent with great potentials. It is a mosaic of cultures, religion, race and ethnic groups which diversity should serve as a source of strength rather than division. It is within this context and the abiding faith that I have in the ability of our people to overcome even the most difficult challenges that makes me bold to say to you, our distinguished friends, that Africa does not lack the means to bring about her development, nor is the continent short of

ideas and development strategies. We have the means, we have the ideas and we have the will. In fact, the leadership on the Continent which is increasingly prioritizing its activities, has begun to move into the direction of finding African solutions to African problems.

There is a growing recognition among the African peoples and their leaders that we are our own liberators and that the development of the African continent is first and foremost the primary responsibility of the Africans. But, we need to put our own house in order to forge a mighty stride towards genuine freedom from political oppression and economic deprivation. There is ample evidence to suggest that African leaders are more than ever determined and committed to see that Africa establishes its own niche in the emerging world of globalization and competitiveness. We are, more than ever convinced that Africa has a role and will make a significant contribution to the comity of nations in the new millennium.

Africa has the will, the means and resources to take its rightful place in the next millennium. However, at the end of the day this will depend on how best Africa utilizes the resources and talents of its people and channel them towards the attainment of the collective goals of all its countries. I suggest that confidence and trust in ourselves is key in our endeavours as we prepare to enter the new millennium.

Our governments should be able to mobilize the immense energies and resources of our people. They should ensure the mobilization and equitable participation of our women not only in the process of economic and social development but in all other spheres of human endeavour including in the area of governance. Our governments should engage the civil society as a full partner in the social, economic and political programmes, and provide opportunities for our youth to exercise their intelligence, talent and dynamism. The civil society on its part should be more audacious and should not hesitate to engage governments in a constructive dialogue on issues which are of primary concern to the people.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to conclude my remarks by emphasizing that Africa is committed to work assiduously and with greater determination towards a new agenda for peace and development. We, at the OAU, will continue to support efforts aimed at creating a new political and economic dispensation on the continent to facilitate the emergence of a new Africa with a new vision and a new momentum to accelerate the development of a political environment conducive for the promotion of collective self

reliance. Over the years our leaders have also recognized the imperative of a comprehensive security framework that should provide the basis for economic development and prosperity.

We are now, and increasingly so, living in a global village. The advent of new information technology is every day making the world smaller and has increasingly brought peoples and nations closer. In this new and inter-dependent world problems affecting one country affect the neighbours and indeed, the world at large. No one nation can pretend that the problems of other nations are not of its concern. The rich North cannot extricate itself from the poor South. The problems of the poor of South have serious implications for the rich of the North. This is why in our global village we need to build a new partnership based on common interests, shared values and responsibilities. A new partnership that will ensure prosperity for all rich and poor alike. It is also why as Africa prepares itself to get its own house in order through the adoption and implementation of various policies and action encompassing political, economic and social domains, we remain hopeful that the new millennium will usher in a new spirit of international understanding and solidarity which

will be supportive of Africa's efforts. Genuine interdependence demands that. Without it, notwithstanding the gigantic technological and scientific breakthrough that we are all beneficiaries, the very concept of a global village will be seriously undermined.

I thank you.