

Interview with Ms. Raghida Dergham of DASTUR Magazine - March 16, 1980

President of the 34th General Assembly Tanzanian Ambassador
Salim Ahmed Salim is a notable figure in international politics.

Recognized as an authority on African affairs, Salim is also noted for his in depth knowledge of African-Arab relations. His brilliant career as a diplomat has gained him an international impeccable reputation in the third world and the west and east.

Born in Zanzibar on 23 January 1942, Salim served early in his political career as founder and first vice-president of the all-Zanzibar Students Union (1960) and later (1961-62) as Deputy Chief Representative of the Zanzibar Office in Havana. In 1963, he was Chief Editor of a Zanzibar Daily and was Secretary-General of the All-Zanzibar Journalists Organization.

Salim has been the Permanent Representative of the United Republic of Tanzania to the UN since 1970, and Chairman of the Special Committee of 24 on Decolonization from 1972 to 1980.

Prior to his assignment at the United Nations, Salim served in 1969 as Ambassador to the People's Republic of China and to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Earlier, he served as Director of the African and Middle East Affairs Division of the Tanzanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1968 and 1969, High Commissioner to India From 1965 to 1968, and Ambassador of Zanzibar to Egypt in 1964 and 1965.

Salim served as Conference Director of the Ministerial Meeting of East and Central African States, held in Dar es Salaam in January 1969, and Secretary-General at the Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned States, held in Dar es Salaam in April of the following year.

He has represented his country at countless International Conferences, and has attended every General Assembly Session since 1966. He has just returned from a trip to the Gulf Area.

In this exclusive interview with AD-DASTOUR, President Salim shed light on economic cooperation among developing countries (Group of 77) and with the developed world - particularly following the ministerial meeting of the Group of 77 in New York.

Q.) At Havana's nonaligned summit, developing countries concentrated largely on the role of energy in economic cooperation, as a result a South-South dialogue began to crystalize. How genuine, in your opinion is the South-South Dialogue? What does it mean to you, since such dialogue is interpreted differently among developing countries (Group of 77)?

A.) The Havana Summit dealt with all aspects of International Economic Cooperation. But Havana was particularly significant in that it provided an important framework for global negotiations encompassing also the vital question of energy.

I believe that the South-South Dialogue is not only a genuine proposition but an indispensable factor in the welfare of all developing countries. It is also in my view a crucial element for meaningful international economic cooperation.

South-South Dialogue means a genuine and sustained effort to promote relations and cooperation among developing countries within the spirit of collective self-reliance. Such relations are important not only for the collective welfare and progress of the developing countries but are also vital in enhancing the negotiating position of the South in their relations with the North.

Q.) The first stage of negotiations began at the UN January with meetings of the Group of Experts, and was followed by a high level Delegations Meetings - both prepared for the Ministerial Meeting held in New York the week of March 10th. Do you think the Group of 77 is now ready to proceed to the Special Assembly Session in August when developing and developed countries move on global negotiations?

A.) The issue is not so much whether the group of 77 is now ready. For negotiations are not an event but a process. Every step is important in the overall context of promoting meaningful negotiations.

The Ministerial Conference in New York has made an important input for the preparations for the forthcoming Special Session. Representatives of the Group of 77 as they meet together with the representatives of the developed world in the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole around the end of March. Then, an important and historic extraordinary summit of the Organization of African Unity to be held in Lagos, Nigeria, in April this year on the question of economic issues which is bound to give an important additional input.

Further, I understand that there is a possibility for OPEC Summit Conference to be held maybe in Baghdad, before the Special Session in August.

Finally there is also to be another ministerial conference of the 77 preceeding the Special Session.

All these will play vital role in adequately preparing the developing countries for the Special Assembly Session due to begin in New York August 25th.

But what the New York Ministerial Conference has already clearly achieved is to create favorable conditions, from the point of view of developing countries in approaching and contributing to the main processes that lie ahead leading to the Special Session.

Q.) What has the Ministerial Meeting accomplished? What is the Agenda? And how is the question of energy in global negotiations - being resolved?

A.) There was a unanimous identification and placing on the agenda of the areas of concern. Five main areas of concentration were identified. Those are: raw materials, energy, trade, development, money and finance.

The presence of Ministers and the frank discussion that took place leading to a common position was an important result of the conference. Among other things, the Ministerial Conference stressed on a unified common position of the Group of 77 in the negotiations with the developed countries.

The emphasis also on promoting South-South relationship thus leading to a firm partnership among the developing countries was an equally important outcome.

To begin with, it is generally accepted, the question of energy and the position of OPEC has brought about the momentum in the struggle for the New International Economic Order (NIEO). Secondly as is evident from the areas of concentration agreed upon, the question of energy is to be tackled as an integral part of the global negotiations.

Within the context of the South-South relations, the recommendations of the OPEC Strategic Group in London, which will be submitted to the OPEC Summit are being eagerly awaited.

In other words, nobody expected that the question of energy would be resolved in the Ministerial Conference. It was not the purpose of that Conference simply to discuss the question of energy. But what the conference has done is to include the issue of energy, which is an important issue in its proper global context.

Q.) OPEC countries are at times accused of being largely responsible for inflation in power developing countries. OPEC refutes such allegations. It furthermore argues that singling out energy in global negotiations is unacceptable. OPEC also began to raise another question - that imported commodities from developing countries (other than oil) should also be discussed. How do you view these questions?

A.) It is wrong to say that the price of oil is the only factor responsible for inflation in the non-oil producing developing countries.

The prices of industrialized goods and related commodities from the developed world have been skyrocketing over the years. It will however also be naive not to consider the impact of the rising prices of oil on the economies of the non-oil producing countries. The latter have to cope with the spiralling prices of industrial goods, the escalating prices of oil, and related products like fertilizers.

In real terms, therefore, these countries and more particularly the least developed among them are facing enormous economic difficulties.

It is an accepted fact that from the point of view of the developing countries that you cannot single out only the question of energy. Both oil producing and non-oil producing developing countries accept the fact that energy must be viewed in the context of other issues.

The oil producing countries understandably argue that energy is their chief raw material and that this raw material is non-renewable. It is therefore accepted that the discussion on energy must be taken in the totality of the other vital economic questions. You cannot however compare the value of any simple commodity from the developing countries with that of oil.

On the issue of inflation, it is important to bear in mind other factors. For example the role of the transnational corporations and the instability of some of the currencies.

Furthermore, it is interesting to take note of some of the examples given to argue against the holding of the question of energy as being the main source of inflation. This, it is often pointed out that some of the developed countries with a lower importation of oil like the US have a higher inflation rate (18-0/0) while other developed countries which mainly depend on foreign oil import like Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany have a far less inflation rate (less than 4-0/0).

Q.) As a Tanzanian National, do you feel that the Group of 77 is threatened by dis-unity, and that this would continue to weaken its position in the North-South dialogue.

A.) There are at times tensions within the Group of 77. This is only natural. After all this is a group of about 120 countries with different circumstances, different state of economic development, and different perceptions. But I do not believe there is any threat to the unity of the Group as such, because this unity is not based on altruistic motivations. It is based on political necessity. It is conceived in the interest of the survival and welfare of all.

Whatever differences that exist in respect to tendencies or approaches, these are healthy differences because they are discussed in an atmosphere of frankness and candor, and in recognition of the collective common interest. There is also no doubt that the differences and the tensions that exist will be very much overcome through the efforts made to enhance and promote South-South relationship.

Perhaps this South-South cooperation is rather slow, but certainly there is movement in that direction. The challenge before the group of 77 is how to intensify that movement and thus strengthen its own cohesion and solidarity.

The Ministerial conference has already demonstrated the unity of purpose that unite the group despite the understandably points of differences from within in respect to the best approaches to be taken.

Q.) In your capacity as the President of the 34th General Assembly, what do you expect in August when you preside the Special Session for Global Negotiations?

A.) I hope for movement - genuine and serious movement in international economic cooperation. It is important that as we launch the Third International Development Strategy for the decade of the 1980s, and as the Assembly proceeds to launch formally the Global Negotiations, we do so in the spirit of dialogue and cooperation and not in confrontation.

But such spirit can only be realized when there is a clear trend towards movement of change the present unacceptable economic situation. Thus, the much talked about political will, will have to be displayed in concrete terms by the developed world in the forthcoming session.

Speaking personally, I remain optimistic.