

**Your Excellency, Omar Hassan Ahmed El-Bashir
President of the Republic of Sudan;**

**Your Excellency, Blaise Compaore
President of Burkina Faso, and
Current Chairman of the Organization
of African Unity**

Honourable Ministers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

(The Speech)

I wish to welcome all the participants to this OAU Ministerial Meeting on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in Africa. I wish also to express our profound gratitude to the government and people of the Sudan for hosting this meeting and for extending to all the delegates their well-known and traditional hospitality.

In offering to host this meeting, the Government of the Sudan has, once again, demonstrated its commitment to addressing and seeking durable solutions to the problem of refugees and displaced persons in our Continent.

The fact that this meeting is held in the presence of President El-Bashir and President Compaore further testifies to the commitment of Africa and its leaders to finding a lasting solution to the problem of refugees and displaced persons in the Continent. I wish to thank most sincerely both Presidents El-Bashir and Compaore for gracing this occasion by their

presence thus providing encouragement to all of us in the efforts to find solutions to the problem of refugees and displaced persons.

The problem of refugees and displaced persons has always been part of the agenda of our continental Organization. It was in recognition of the importance of this issue that it was deemed necessary to establish a Special Commission to deal with this scourge which has assumed alarming proportions over the years.

Despite all the efforts deployed by the Organization and its member states, the situation of refugees and displaced persons remains disturbing. That is why it was found necessary to convene a Special Ministerial Meeting specifically devoted to addressing the problem in a comprehensive manner, and to come up with recommendations aimed at alleviating the suffering of millions of our people.

As we gather here today to deliberate on the problem of refugees and displaced persons in Africa, the picture that emerges from our Continent continues to be disheartening and a source of great concern to us all. Indeed, as we are all aware, our Continent generates millions of refugees and displaced persons. The figures have been varying over the years, depending on prevailing circumstances. But the fact remains that our Continent is hosting the largest population of refugees and displaced persons in the world.

As we meet here today, we should therefore express our profound sympathy and compassion with our fellow Africans who have been forced to

flee their homes or their countries under circumstances which are beyond their control. Many of them fled their countries to escape atrocities and dehumanizing experiences brought about by conflicts raging in their countries. Others have been forced to exile out of fear for their lives due to ethnic intolerance and human rights abuses. And yet others had to run away because of natural calamities, including drought, famine and floods.

This large number of refugees and displaced persons has created acute humanitarian situation in our Continent. Over the years, the countries of asylum have extended generous hospitality and support to this needy population. They have done so despite great difficulties, but in the spirit of genuine African tradition of solidarity and caring for others caught in unfortunate circumstances. Our countries need to be commended for the sacrifice they have thus made to alleviate the suffering of our people.

On its part, the international community has also provided assistance to the refugees and displaced persons in our Continent. I would like, at this juncture, to express our appreciation to those who have been supporting us, particularly the UN Agencies, especially the UNHCR, and Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations, including the ICRC.

It is against this background, that we are concerned with increasing signs indicating a compassion fatigue within and outside our Continent. In the Continent, our countries are increasingly finding it difficult to respond to the plight of refugees and displaced persons as they used to do. Even more disturbing are reports of incidents of hostility towards refugees and displaced persons in some of our countries. Clearly, this is not a

generalized trend. It is certainly a reflection of the shrinking resources available at national level to provide social services to our people, including the refugees. But we need to draw the necessary conclusions from these incidents and to take necessary measures to avoid the escalation of this phenomenon.

At the same time, the assistance provided by the international community to sustain the refugees and displaced persons is also diminishing. This obviously is a matter of serious concern to us in the Continent. I believe, therefore, that this meeting should provide the opportunity to send a strong message to the international community that while Africa is ready to assume its share of the burden, the international community is also expected to continue to assume its responsibility and demonstrate, in concrete terms, its solidarity.

I also believe that this meeting should provide an occasion for us, as Africans, to discuss this problem seriously, frankly and honestly. Let us call these problems by their names. Let us admit that there are grave humanitarian tragedies unfolding before our very eyes. The loss of lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Rwanda, in Burundi, in Somalia, in Angola, in Southern Sudan, in Guinea Bissau and elsewhere, are not mere statistics. The instability that has contributed to produce these tragedies continues to unfold and assume catastrophic consequences. But these challenges are by no means insurmountable. What is required is for us to summon the necessary political will to overcome the underlying factors that have only served to complicate the problems of refugees and displaced persons in Africa.

The time has now come for us to stop looking for scapegoats to the problems in our Continent. Even though the temptations for us is to blame everyone but ourselves for the problems in our Continent, we need to move beyond putting the blame of everything bad in the Continent on others and to look inwards to identify the source of the problems and the solutions of those problems.

Africans will have to come to terms with the reality that the rest of the world is increasingly neither willing nor ready to solve our problems for us. Indeed, let us move away from the illusion that the rest of the world care more about our problems than we do. The sad fact is that they do not and will no longer assume responsibility for Africa's problems.

The good news, however, is that our governments and peoples are assuming their responsibility for finding the right solutions to our problems, including in particular the problems of refugees and displaced persons. So let us stop this feeling of hopelessness and helplessness which is based on the false premise that the salvation for Africa can only come from outside the Continent.

In making this call for action, I am constantly inspired by our past experiences in the struggle for independence and against apartheid and discrimination. Indeed, it was only through the sweat and toil of the leaders and the people involved in the struggle, strongly supported by governments and people around the Continent, inspired by the unity of purpose which saw Africa acting as one, that we prevailed.

In making my strong appeal to African States to assume more responsibilities in the effort to address the root causes of those factors that have contributed to increasing the numbers of refugees and displaced persons, I am not unmindful of the role of our partners in dealing with the situation.

Indeed, the whole world shares, I believe, the grave concern that we have in relation to the extremely precarious and potentially explosive situations prevailing in some parts of our Continent. It is unfortunate that in spite of the fact that governments continued to grant asylum and extend assistance to refugees in line with international Conventions to deal with the problem, the situation has not improved in any considerable sense. Our governments have taken their responsibilities seriously, sometimes at great social and economic cost to their own people. In most cases, the cost of bearing these responsibilities cannot be quantified. Recently, representatives of the OAU Commission for Refugees and Displaced Persons visited different parts of the Continent. Following those visits, the members of the Commission were able to see, at first hand, the disastrous consequences of refugee influx in different countries. They reported that these influxes have created strain on the meager resources of African countries, over-stretched their infrastructure and threatened the social and political stability of the host countries.

Apart from these consequences, we are also disturbed by the environmental degradation caused by the influx of refugees and displaced

persons. We are also disturbed by the phenomenon of armed refugees who, have, in some cases, become a source of insecurity and instability.

As much as governments have a responsibility to abide by all international Conventions related to the issue of refugees and displaced persons, I am afraid that the burden of assuming these responsibilities is becoming heavier on many of our Member States. It is within this context, that I feel that there should be more burden sharing, in which case the responsibility of hosting refugees and extending assistance should not lie solely with the countries of asylum. This is even more so as these countries are among the poorest in the world. I believe that a comprehensive approach is needed to provide the much needed material and financial assistance as well as other basic needs in such areas as food, education, water, sanitation, clothing, shelter and infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

I am also aware that the best solution to the refugee problem in Africa should be through voluntary repatriation. However, voluntary repatriation can only be feasible in an atmosphere of peace, security and stability. This brings me to raise the issue which I consider critical to our agenda on the stability of our Continent.

In a few days from now, the Central Organ of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution will be meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso to consider various conflict situations in the Continent. The situation prevailing in the Horn of Africa with the dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and in the Great Lakes Region with the unfolding crisis in the

Democratic Republic of Congo, will certainly feature prominently during the Summit deliberations. The ongoing crisis in Anjouan will also be addressed with a view to determining an appropriate African response. Other conflict situations such as those in Burundi, Angola and Guinea Bissau will also be discussed.

As we meet here, therefore, we should recommit ourselves to addressing the challenge posed by conflicts in our Continent and which are producing millions of refugees and displaced persons. In this regard, I wish to encourage both the Government of the Sudan and SPLA to persevere on the path of dialogue and negotiations and continue to cooperate with regional efforts aimed at seeking a peaceful solution to the conflict in Southern Sudan. We are looking forward for an early solution to the conflict so that all the people of this great Nation can enjoy peace and tranquility, channel their energy and resources towards development and the improvement of their living conditions and make their important contribution to the socio-economic development of the Continent.

Finally, let me express the hope that as we meet here, we all rededicate ourselves to taking seriously the challenge of addressing the scourge of poverty in our Continent and which is at the core of many of our problems, including the problem of refugees and displaced persons. In this regard, I submit that the task of building the African Economic Community should be taken with renewed vigour and determination. Indeed, in a world where globalization is increasingly becoming the order of the day and where even the most powerful nations are uniting to be competitive in the global

economy, Africa has no other alternative but to further unite and pool its resources for the largest benefit of its peoples.

In other words, I believe that we should not see the problem of refugees and displaced persons in isolation of the larger situation of our Continent. We should address this problem in its various dimensions, humanitarian, socio-economic and political.

I am confident that this meeting will provide a new momentum in our efforts at addressing the problem of refugees and displaced persons and that it will mark the beginning a new global partnership to address this problem in a comprehensive manner and in a spirit of greater African and international solidarity.