

REMARKS BY H.E. DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM, SECRETARY-GENERAL
OF THE OAU, AT THE ADDIS ABABA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

ON THE

OCCASION OF AFRICA AWARENESS WEEK

ADDIS ABABA,
ETHIOPIA.

22 MAY, 1995

Parents,
Staff and Students of the International
Community School,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to have been invited to address you on the occasion of the FIRST AFRICA AWARENESS WEEK at the International Community school. At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation both to the Faculty Members of your school and all the students for the initiative of holding an Africa Awareness Week, which is a unique and most welcome initiative by the International School.

It is all the more opportune that such an activity should be held in Addis Ababa which hosts the Headquarters of our Continental Organization, the OAU. I am confident that during the course of this Week, the situation in Africa will feature prominently in your programme of activities and that you will be able to focus on the history, the peoples, cultures and traditions of Africa, with a view to educating yourselves on the rich heritage of this Continent.

This is a very important initiative because it is not always that we hear about the good things happening in Africa as the news media is always dominated by reports of conflict and war, famine, disease and poverty. And yet Africa is the cradle of

civilization. From the Nile Valley where history records the early civilization of the world to the pyramids of Egypt and the Steles of Nubia, these are all testimonies to the great knowledge acquired by Africans in sciences like geometry, building technology and the arts.

In Southern Africa the great Zimbabwe ruins were known for their grandeur as far back as the 16th century as evidenced by the extensive writings of 16th century Portuguese explorers. The great civilization of West Africa, particularly those of the Ashanti and Benin Kingdoms have been extensively documented. Here in East Africa, we have the Steles of Axum and rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. Indeed, all over Africa, evidence abounds of the wealth of knowledge acquired by our forefathers and passed down to succeeding generations. I shall not dwell much longer on the history of Africa as I assume that an institution like yours must have accorded Africa's history a proper place in its curriculum. However, if this was not the case before now, then it is my sincere hope that this initiative will mark a good beginning in that direction.

I am sure that like me and many other Africans you must be wondering why inspite of our rich and diverse heritiage in the

arts and in the sciences, and the many resources that the continent is blessed with, Africa has lagged behind the rest of the world in terms of development and progress. I believe that one of the factors responsible for this unfortunate situation relates to the many problems that confronted the continent, including slavery, colonialism and the exploitation of our rich natural resources.

Even though it is a fact that other parts of the world, especially the Northern Hemisphere have advanced technologically well ahead of Africa, it is also true that our continent, inspite of the many problems confronting it, is a continent in transition from under-developmment to becoming an economically strong and developed societies. Africa is a continent with a long history, authentic moral and cultural values that all Africans should be pround of, and even though there are very disturbing developments in many countries of Africa, it is also true that the torch of freedom which was lit in the early fifties has now resulted in the total liberation of the continent.

Whereas in 1963, when the OAU was formed there were only 32 independent African states, today we have 53 sovereign and independent member states of the OAU, including the Republic of South Africa. This has been a great achievement for Africa, for

at last, we were able to realize one of the main dreams of our Founding Fathers, that of achieving an Africa free from the shackles of colonialism and racial discrimination.

Having won the struggle for political freedom, we are now confronted with another major struggle - that of economic liberation. We are now engaged in the process of laying a solid foundation for the African Economic Community which is expected to free our peoples from disease, hunger and poverty. But in order to do this, we have to do something about the many conflicts and wars which are taking place on the continent; and which have brought about the unsatisfactory social and economic situation in many of our countries. We also need to tackle the poor health conditions of our people and the effects of the AIDS pandemic, as well as the continued indebtedness of our countries to foreign financial institutions. Additionally, we need to ensure that our people grow enough food to feed the whole continent and to put an end to the displacement of persons on the continent. As I speak to you now, Africa has 6 million refugees and 16 million displaced persons, which has made it impossible to achieve political, economic and social progress, as well as bring about the much needed environment of peace and stability in the continent for economic prosperity.

However, the situation in Africa is not only characterised by the bad news you hear on the radio and television everyday. There are many positive developments in many parts of the continent which have gone unreported because only bad news makes news. I want to tell you about a few of them.

The march towards democracy and popular participation by the people in Government, through the conduct of elections is a process that had begun in earnest in our continent. Multi-party Elections have been held in many African countries. Of course, there are still many problems as they are bound to be in a period of transition which our continent is going through. But these shortcomings will be overcome. And the process of democratization itself is irreversible. And this is how it should be ! I believe you know that democracy is not new to our culture in Africa. Indeed, many traditional African societies operated on the basis of discussions and consultations under the tree from where consensus was arrived on matters affecting the lives of the people in the community. In consolidating the process of democratization, therefore, our leaders all over the continent have acknowledged the need to involve our peoples in the political and economic processes affecting their lives to ensure the release of all their energies for the socio-economic development of their respective communities.

Unlike what happened in the past, there is an increasing awareness of the need to respect the human rights of all Africans which is why the OAU has set up the African Commission for Human and Peoples Rights. In the area of conflicts, again our leaders have resolved to bring to an end the many wars and conflicts which have been raging in the continent. This was why in 1993 in Cairo, Egypt, African Heads of State and Government decided to establish the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Manangement and Resolution.

In the important area of economic cooperation and integration, African leaders had taken far-reaching decisions to ensure that the vast human and natural resources that this continent is endowed with are put into good use for economic development and good governance. To this end, the OAU after a long and in-depth study provided the necessary options for the creation of an African Economic Community. The Treaty establishing this Community was signed by African leaders in Abuja, Nigeria in 1991 during the 29th Session of the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government.

The main aim of the African Economic Community is to promote the economic, social and cultural development of the continent

through the integration of African economies, in order to increase self-reliance and promote an indigenous and self-sustained development. This is a process that will take a long time to achieve but the important thing is that the first step has been taken on the long march to Africa's economic freedom.

It is becoming increasingly evident that Africa cannot continue to depend on the outside world to solve its problems. In the face of increasing attempts to marginalize the continent and a reduction in the amount of assistance for many of our countries, Africa has no choice but to take its destiny in its own hand, for it is only when we help ourselves that we can expect others to help us.

In the areas of social development it is a matter for deep regret that in spite of the efforts which have been made by our governments, many of our children do not have the opportunity to go to school and obtain formal education, which is why it is important that those African students who are privileged to be here should make the best of the opportunity being offered to you as future leaders of the continent.

As you very well know the overwhelming majority of people on the continent comprises the youth. It is therefore, true that the

future of this continent will, to a large extent, depend on the determination of the youth, first to understand the situation that prevails on the continent and working hand in hand with the other sections of the population, all across the continent, to build upon the foundations which have been laid by previous and current leaders to bring about a strong and prosperous continent.

As youths, Africa expects you to be committed to the protection of Africa's interests, particularly with respect to improving the lives of our people. You will be expected to contribute to the attainment of peace and the resolution of conflicts. You must begin from your school to inculcate the spirit of resolving problems through dialogue rather than by violence. You must learn to be tolerant of the opinions of others which are different from yours and understand that our differences and diverse backgrounds, including differences in race, ethnicity, culture and religions should be a source of strength rather than the cause of disunity and conflict. You must always uphold unity in diversity as your watch-word. You will also be expected to play a crucial role in confronting the many challenges that face not only our continent but the world at large, including such areas as the preservation of our environment and guard against ecological disasters.

I cannot end this address without pointing out that the very fact that you are all studying at the International Community School of Addis Ababa is a practical demonstration of the fact that we are all one, inspite of our different backgrounds. The International School brings together people from differnt parts of Africa and other parts of the world to study and live together. This is in line with the fact that the world is a global village and whether one is an African, European, an American or an Asian, we all share a common humanity and a responsibility to ensure the preservation of our human societies.

For those of you therefore, who are non-Africans you should have a sense of belonging, particularly since your parents work in Africa and are playing special roles in different endeavours with their African brothers and sisters. In particular, I urge you to make it a point to understand the realities of Africa, both the good and the bad and in your own special ways, join us in making the continent a better place.

Finally, to all the youths of Africa, I urge you like your forebears to become freedom fighters for Africa - freedom from poverty, freedom from ingnorance and freedom from disease. On our

part as leaders, let me assure you that we shall continue to do everything necessary to ensure the continued peace, stability and development of our great continent.

Let me end by wishing you the Faculty and students of the International Community School, a very successful Africa Awareness Week and assure you of my readiness and that of the OAU at all times to support such initiatives which are geared towards inculcating in our young ones, a greater awareness of what is happening in their environment.

Thank you and good luck !