



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**STATEMENT OF H.E. DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,**  
**SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU ON THE**  
**OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION**  
**OF THE OAU DAY**

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

MAY 22, 1997

**Fellow Africans,**

On 25<sup>th</sup> May, 1997 we shall celebrate the 34<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our continental Organization. As in the past, this day will be a day of commemoration, celebration and reflection. It will also be an opportunity to remind ourselves of the historic long march of our peoples towards freedom, unity and human dignity. Indeed, we should recall with a sense of pride that African unity and solidarity and the strong vision of a united Continent that the founding Fathers of the OAU stood for, defended and pursued vigorously have been sustained despite the trials and difficulties our peoples had to go through over the years. We should always remind ourselves that whenever our peoples stood united, they were able to make great achievements.

Yes, we still have problems. Our Continent continues to be faced with the scourge of conflicts such as those still raging in Burundi and Somalia or the one that has just ended in Zaire/Congo. Poverty, illiteracy and diseases are still rampant in our Continent. Africa is still hosting the largest number of refugees and displaced persons in the world. The suffering and agony of the refugees and displaced persons in the Great Lakes Region pained us all.

As we celebrate Africa Day, it is fitting that we remain conscious of the plight of the millions of our people who have been forced to vote with their feet. It is equally appropriate, and indeed more urgently so, that Africa continues to reaffirm and adhere scrupulously to the important principles of asylum. Above all, we must, at all time, give primacy to the sanctity of life and do our utmost

even in the most difficult circumstances to show compassion and facilitate unhindered assistance to the refugees and displaced persons in need. We owe this to our common humanity as well as to our fundamental commitment to African solidarity.

The involvement of children as combatants or victims of war thus making them grow in an atmosphere of violence and hatred is a disturbing phenomenon which undermines the very fabric of our societies. We must intensify our efforts to put an end to the boy/girl soldier in our Continent.

As we celebrate the 34<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our Organization, we need, therefore, to draw lessons from our past and recent history. We should avoid mistakes of the past. The most recent crisis in the Great Lakes Region has taught us a lesson on the crucial importance of listening to and empowering our peoples. Indeed, the events which took place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo provided a clear example of what can happen when the people are denied the democratic options. It is an important lesson on the need to give our people an alternative to violence to express their political choice. The Zaire experience needs to be reflected upon in our Continent as we forge ahead to consolidate peace and stability in the Continent through *inter alia* empowering our people in deciding how they are governed, by whom and for what period.

The Zaire experience has also eloquently demonstrated the imperative need for our societies to seriously evolve and manage change towards a democratic dispensation. Indeed, we must make change our ally and manage it smoothly.

Another valuable lesson of the changes that have forcibly swept that country is the clear danger inherent in trampling underfoot the fundamental and human rights of peoples. Thus the scrupulous respect for human and peoples' rights is not only in keeping with the logic of our struggles for freedom or for that matter in keeping with our commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights whose Fiftieth Anniversary we shall be celebrating next year. Nor is it simply due to our attachment to the OAU Convention on Human and Peoples' Rights. It is above all one of the most effective guarantees for peace, security and stability in our societies.

I fervently hope that the suffering of the peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo will henceforth be a matter of the past and that the new leadership will engage the country in a new and broad-based political dispensation based on accommodation, unity and cohesion. I also hope that the new situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo will contribute in a great manner towards achieving durable peace, security and stability in the Great Lakes Region. In all this, the new Administration under the leadership of President Laurent Desire Kabila merits the full support of Africa and the understanding and cooperation of the international community.

From what we have learnt from the various crises in our Continent, it is clear that there is now, more than ever before, the need for Africa to equip itself to effectively address conflict situations in the Continent. We need to strengthen the capacity of our continental Organization to respond more efficiently to crises before they erupt into full blown conflicts. In this regard, preventive diplomacy should be pursued more vigorously in cooperation with our Member States and in partnership with the United Nations and African Regional Organizations.

As we look at the larger picture of our continent, there is no doubt that Africa is moving on the right path. The seven years civil war in Liberia which had witnessed untold suffering, death and destruction has been brought to an end thanks essentially to the efforts and sacrifices of the ECOWAS countries and especially of the ECOMOG contributing countries, Liberia is to have democratic elections on July 19, 1997 where the ballot and not the bullet will decide the destiny of its people.

In Sierra Leone, despite the recent set backs relating to the implementation of the Abidjan Accord, the process itself is basically on course. Indeed, there are some encouraging signs even in the complex conflicts in Burundi and Somalia. Most of our countries are seriously involved in political, economic and social reforms aimed at releasing the energies of their peoples and harnessing them towards socio-economic development and progress. Positive results are gradually being witnessed in many of our countries. Democratization is gaining

root and momentum in our Continent. Our peoples are determined to make their contribution to socio-economic and political endeavours in our countries.

Democratic institutions are being strengthened while a politics of tolerance and accommodation are being promoted to take over from the politics of exclusion which, in the past, have caused a lot of damage to our societies. Efforts are being deployed to make use of the diversities of our Continent as a source of strength and no more as a factor of division. These efforts should be pursued with greater determination. As a whole, our countries are adjusting themselves to play their rightful role and make their contribution in this new emerging world order. The challenge before the African leadership therefore is to live up to the expectations of the people so that they can together usher our Continent in the new millennium. I wish to seize the opportunity to urge our Member States and our peoples to take seriously the task of building the African Economic Community which constitutes a unique framework for collective recovery and development. Beyond the goals of economic cooperation and integration, the African Economic Community is also a forum where peace could be further nurtured and promoted.

We need to do more to consolidate our achievements and strengthen our determination to make our Continent a better place for our people. In the process, we should be guided by the fact that our efforts will be crowned with success if we stand united with a common vision and sense of purpose to build a Continent that is capable of providing the basic needs of our peoples in a sustained manner.

I am confident that if we fully apply our energies to meet the challenges before us, we can and must succeed in our individual and collective endeavours to transform our Continent into a land of peace and progress and a Continent of great opportunities, a Continent whose people are determined to build a new and dynamic future for themselves and for the generations to come.

I believe that our people have the capacity, the will and determination to forge ahead to an era of peace and development in our Continent. Together, in unity and solidarity, we shall overcome.

Addis Ababa,

22 May 1997