

***AFRICA AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM***

*Address given by H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,  
Secretary General of the OAU at the University  
of Capetown on the Occasion of the Conferment of  
a Degree of Doctor of Laws (Honoris Causa) by the  
University of Cape Town*

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**Madam Vice Chancellor,  
Members of the University Community  
Distinguished Guests  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am deeply honoured by the decision of the University of Cape Town to confer upon me the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*. I am grateful to those who proposed my name for this award and who made this occasion possible.

While I acknowledge the prestige of being conferred with this distinguished award by the University of Cape Town and the honour associated with it, I believe that its meaning and essence goes far deeper than the particular spotlight cast on me this evening and the accolade that I receive. The decision to offer this degree and to include it as part of today's congregation is a recognition of the role of our Continental body --the Organization of African Unity -- in its pursuit for freedom, justice and the

development of our people. I consider this award to be a testimony to the accomplishments of the Organization that I have been privileged to serve, and as a vindication to the wisdom of the founding fathers of the OAU.

The significance of this award is enhanced by the prestige and prominence of the University of Cape Town, which has remained a prominent centre of academic excellence, not only in South Africa but in Africa and in the world at large. For more than 100 years, this institution has continued to advance into the cutting edge of knowledge in teaching and research. Its highly courageous decision to confer an honorary degree on President Nelson Mandela while he was still in incarceration was not only an inspiration to the liberation struggle, but it was also a statement on which side of history the University stood at the time of reckoning. Indeed, it represented a reaffirmation by the University of Cape Town of its quest for justice, freedom and equality, and its commitment to truth and fairness in the social and political life of this country.

Madam Vice Chancellor, the fact that this degree is being conferred by a South African institution, gives the award and the ceremony a very special meaning for me. In the years of my public life, I have received many honours and awards. I tend to treasure this particular award because it is connected to a life-long endeavour in the struggle for freedom and justice in our continent that I have been honoured to be part of. This award brings back memories of symbolic moments in the protracted struggle of the South African people for freedom and justice marked by commitment and sacrifice of the valiant freedom fighters. On this occasion, I look back with respect and admiration to the Long March to Freedom by the South African people and the great victory they have achieved, and I vividly remember the joy of receiving President Mandela, a man who has sacrificed his life for the freedom of his people, at the headquarters of our Continental Organization in Addis Ababa, shortly after his release. This award also triggers memories of my first visit to South Africa, on the eve of its first ever truly democratic elections which brought in its wake a new dispensation, a visit that also brought me to this beautiful city of Cape Town.

As I receive this degree, let me share with you some of my reflections on the challenges facing our continent on the eve of the new millennium. Indeed, as we look at our continent today, we proudly get a sense of satisfaction and victory that the struggle against colonialism and apartheid is over. We have managed by the 1990s to liberate the whole continent against the indignity of foreign rule, and to obliterate the despicable system in which human value is determined by the pigmentation of one's skin. Unfortunately, our success in these struggles has not in all cases engendered the essential freedoms from poverty, disease, persecution, ignorance, and marginalization.

x Africa still trails in all the indices of human and economic development. Our continent is confronted with conflicts, rampant corruption, endemic poverty and perpetual calamities, both natural and man-made. There are more than 6 million refugees in our continent and many more displaced people. A few days ago, we marked the International AIDS Day, and it was noted that out of the total 34 million infected people with HIV, 22 million people are in Africa. There are close to a dozen conflicts raging at this moment in time. At the same time, the position of our continent in the global economic transactions has not shifted from what existed in the 1950s.



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Africa still remains peripheral in international trade and investments, in technological acquisition and development, and in the general flow of financial resources. While the real per capita income has been seen to rise in the last five years, it is still below the levels of the 1960s. We are still importers of capital goods and insignificant exporters of unprocessed primary products, and we remain vulnerable to economic instability that is triggered elsewhere. At the same time, we spend a substantial amount of our foreign earnings to servicing a foreign debt that is increasingly proving to be unrepayable.

All these negative attributes characterizing our continent are real, and they cannot be denied. Unfortunately, often times they are projected as being the main feature of our continent. Clearly, however, this is not the case.

There is a more substantial dimension of African situation and development that tends to be neglected in presenting its image. Africa is changing. This change is multifaceted. African countries are seriously and irreversibly engaged in the process of socio-economic and political transformation.

As we prepare ourselves to enter the new millennium, Africa has to persist along this path of political transformation, as well as economic revitalization and integration.

Three major precepts come to mind when addressing the issue of Africa's political transformation: promotion of peace, security and stability; democracy and good governance; and respect for human rights. I have mentioned earlier that among the disturbing image characterizing our continent today, is the scourge of rampant conflict. I also indicated that right now, there is close to a dozen conflict areas at different levels of intensity that afflicts our continent. In many cases the conflict situation has caused a displacement of people, creation of refugees, diversion of critical resources, and the prevalence of general insecurity. These conflicts lead to loss of lives, waste of resources, destruction of assets, and loss of opportunities.

Indeed, the issue of conflict raises serious concern to all of us. At a continental level, in an effort to respond to this negative trend, in June 1993, a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management and Resolution was established within the Organization of African Unity. This is an instrument that operates at various levels and it is devoted to anticipating and

preventing conflicts, and also to seeking a peaceful and speedy resolution when they occur. In the last five years, the OAU has, through the Mechanism, has been involved in efforts to bring about peaceful solutions to various conflict situations.

African Regional Organizations are now also increasingly involved in managing and resolving conflict situations, and this has compelled them to consolidate their capacities for this task. Nonetheless, while continuing with efforts aimed at strengthening the continental and regional mechanism, a major challenge facing us, especially at the national level, is to develop institutional systems that can withstand political tensions and accommodate divergences without degenerating into conflict situations. At the same time, we need to promote a culture of peace, tolerance, and reconciliation within our social interactions.

The most effective remedy for the incessant conflict and a critical ingredient for our continent's development is the promotion of democracy and good governance. Indeed, the whole struggle against colonialism and apartheid was predicated on the legitimate aspirations of Africans for dignity, freedom and justice, and to their desire to collectively build nations



and institutions that would accommodate all segments of society in charting a common destiny. In this respect, there is need to sustain vigorously the momentum that African countries have embarked upon towards opening the political space through refining electoral systems, promoting pluralistic political involvement, engaging the civil society, and initiating legal and institutional reforms.

I wish to underline at this juncture that while the fundamental principles of democracy and good governance are universal, their application would of necessity have to vary according to socio-cultural values and specific historical realities of every country. There are no ready-made recipes for democracy and governance. Each of our societies may apply the universal principles taking into account its objective conditions and its own peculiarities.

A third component of our political challenge concerns building a culture of respecting human rights. I wish to underline this element, particularly in view of the fact that on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, that is two days from today, we shall be commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed, for us in Africa, the

importance of promoting and protecting human rights cannot be over-emphasized. For hundreds of years people of our continent have suffered from all kinds of indignities, ranging from slavery to colonialism and apartheid. We have experienced the worst effect of being denied basic rights both at the level of human existence and national development.

As we enter the new millennium, the promotion and protection of human rights has to occupy a centre stage of our endeavours. This will involve nurturing values which respect human rights, building institutions, putting in place mechanisms, and allocating resources that will ensure the promotion and respecting of basic rights. At a continental level, a number of treaties and conventions have been adopted, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. More recently, at the June 1998 Summit of Heads of State and Governments, held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, a Protocol on the establishment of an African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights was adopted and signed by 30 Heads of State or their representatives. Among those signatories was, of course, President Mandela. Africa thus became only the third continent, after Europe and Americas, to adopt a protocol establishing an international human rights court.

Underlying the process of political transformation in our continent is the imperative challenge of economic revitalization and integration. We need to revamp our productive capacities and assiduously pursue the agenda for economic co-operation and integration. The same dedication, commitment, and goodwill that spurred the continent in its struggle against colonialism and apartheid has to be deployed in eliminating poverty and fostering economic competitiveness. It is also necessary to streamline our structures of production and distribution so that they can cope with the demands of globalization while at the same time cater to the basic needs of our people.

An important advance was made in 1991, when the Assembly of Heads of State and Government meeting in Abuja signed the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community. The objective of the Community established under the Treaty is to promote economic, social and cultural development and the integration of African economies in order to increase economic self-reliance and promote indigenous and self-sustained development. The challenge, as we enter the new millennium, is to nurture the necessary conditions at various levels, and to execute requisite tasks that

would ensure the accomplishment of the objectives of the African Economic Community.

All the challenges I have adumbrated thus far are compounded by the dramatic transformation that we have experienced in the last quarter of this century. Advances in technology, particularly in the industrialized countries of the West, in the fields of information and communication, have completely changed the system of wealth accumulation. It has triggered a rapid mobility of information, goods, and finance; and fostered a major reorganization in production, distribution and circulation both at the firm and societal levels. This profound shift has the risk of augmenting internal weaknesses and further marginalizing the African continent within the global system, thus posing a challenge of how to put it at centre stage.

Despite the apparent formidability of some of these challenges, there are capacities within the continent which can facilitate a major turn around for the African continent. In this regard, the contribution of a nation such as South Africa needs to be acknowledged. Indeed, since the advent of democracy in this country and its reincorporation in the community of nations, South Africa has been performing a constructive and dynamic role



in fostering socio-economic development in the continent. Capital investment, technological transfers, and supply of services to other African countries have proved to be important catalysts for economic rejuvenation. Similarly, the internal transformation going on within South Africa, particularly its positive deployment of cultural diversities, which have created a rich mosaic that has become a national asset for development, offers a useful experience for the rest of the continent. Furthermore its active involvement in the Regional Organizations and continental initiatives has been of considerable impact.

Let me round up by emphasizing that Africa's predicament as it enters the new millennium underlines the necessity for co-operation and solidarity. Africa and its peoples must summon the will to rise to the occasion and enter the new age with a clearer sense of vision, collective in our endeavours, and committed in our efforts. While the world is described to be a global village, it does not as yet behave like one in which there is a sense of balanced inter-dependence. The prevailing behavioural pattern is one in which the most powerful, by the criteria of economic and political power as well as in terms of efficiency and competition, tend to dominate. In this respect, while Africa is part of the world and remains committed to



international solidarity, its lack of competitive capacities and low levels of efficiency forces it to remain in the periphery. It is Africans themselves who have to take the responsibility and the challenge of making the continent an active actor in the global system.

The responsibility of a University like the UCT is to empower our societies through promoting the requisite knowledge and skills that will enhance our efficiency and competition and permit us to engage effectively for the benefit of our peoples.

I would like to end by conveying my congratulations to all the graduates and to wish them all the best in their future endeavours.

I thank you Madam Vice Chancellor.