



ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY

Statement by H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
Secretary General of the OAU, at the Opening
of the Conference of Ministers of Justice/
Attorneys General on the Establishment of an
African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
12 December 1997

Mr. Chairman,

**Hon. Ato Dawit Yohannes,
Speaker of the House of
People's Representatives of the
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,**

Distinguished Ministers and Attorneys-General,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like, from the outset, to welcome you all to Addis Ababa, the Headquarters of our continental Organization. I would also like to thank Ato Dawit Yohannes, the Speaker of the House of People's Representatives of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, for finding the time from his tight busy schedule to be with us today.

This is the first meeting of Ministers of Justice organized under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity. I am particularly pleased that this first ever OAU meeting of Ministers of Justice is convened to discuss issues related to

human and peoples' rights. This is a clear demonstration of the fact that the issue of human and peoples' rights has gained momentum in our Continent. Personally, I am not surprised. Indeed, I have always taken the view that the struggle of our people for freedom and dignity was basically a struggle for human and peoples' rights. It was therefore normal that our peoples who fought against oppression, humiliation and domination should be at the forefront of the struggle for the respect of human and peoples' rights.

This is not a luxury, neither is it a fashion which is imported from outside Africa. It is a basic requirement in any society and a pre-requisite for human progress and development. Human rights need to be observed, promoted, respected and protected so as to ensure that the energies, the intelligence and the talents of the peoples can be released and channeled towards productive activities in an atmosphere devoid of physical and moral threat. The respect for human rights is a universal requirement based on the equality of

human beings and on the principle of the sanctity of life. And the life of an African is as precious and as important as the life of another person in other Continents.

I am really glad and proud that our Organization has reached this stage in its efforts aimed at promoting human rights in the Continent. We have covered a long way since the OAU Summit adopted the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in 1981. Since then, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights was established and has been working. Despite the modest means put at its disposal, the Commission has been increasingly strengthening its capacity. We, at the OAU, are committed to support this Commission so as to enable it emerge as a strong African Institution to promote respect for human and people's rights in the Continent.

The issue of human rights has also gained impetus with the 1990 landmark declaration adopted by the Assembly of

Heads of State and Government here in Addis Ababa in which they committed themselves to create conditions for a political environment which guarantees human rights and the observance of the rule of law. Since then, we are encouraged to note that our Member States have been taking more seriously the issue of human rights. Increasing number of Organizations both governmental and non-governmental have been established in our Member States. This positive trend should be situated in the context of the efforts at democratization deployed by African States.

While we welcome these happy developments in our Continent, we should not forget that a lot needs to be done to ensure the respect for human rights. Indeed, the abuse of human rights continues to be a source of serious concern in the Continent. I wish to seize the opportunity to urge our Member States to continue to give appropriate attention to this problem.

That is why I consider your present meeting as a crucial one in the sense that it is expected to consider a Draft Protocol on the establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. The establishment of the Court will clearly have far-reaching positive implications for the respect of human and peoples' rights in our Continent. The Draft Protocol has been prepared by a Group of Experts who were requested by the OAU Summit held in Tunis in 1994 to consider ways and means of strengthening the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights including the establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. Pursuant to that decision, a series of three successive meetings of experts were held in Cape Town (South Africa) in September 1995, Nouakchott (Mauritania) in April 1997 and the last meeting was held just a few days ago here in Addis Ababa.

I wish , at this juncture, to express my appreciation to the experts for the efforts they had deployed and the work they

had achieved. I wish also to thank the Ministers and Attorneys-General who have come to Addis Ababa for this meeting. I consider their presence as a testimony of their personal commitment to the promotion of human rights in the Continent.

I wish to underline the fact that your meeting is being held at a time when year-long celebrations marking the 50th Anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have just begun. Clearly, this provides the most propitious occasion for the holding of this meeting which is devoted to the advancement of the cause of human rights in the Continent. This augurs well for 1998 during which the OAU Council of Ministers is expected to hold, in Luanda, a special session devoted to the human rights situation in Africa. Since we are coming close to the end of 1997, let us hope that the New Year will be a year for the greater promotion of the respect for human and peoples' rights in our Continent.