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**STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU,
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM, ON THE OCCASION OF
THE OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE ON COMOROS,**

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Wednesday, December 10, 1997

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to welcome you all to this conference devoted to the consideration of the current crisis in the Comoros and the way forward. I wish to extend a special welcome to the delegations representing the government, the different islands and political forces. We are very pleased that our brothers and sisters of the Federal Government, the Islands of Anjouan, Moheli and Grand Comoros as well as the political parties have responded positively to our invitation. Judging by the broad participation that we are witnessing here, we can say that this is a truly representative conference.

Our conference today takes place amidst the background of a serious crisis that has engulfed the Islands. Regrettably, this is not the first crisis facing the Comorian people. Indeed from the advent of the country's independence in 1975 to date, the Comoros have witnessed

political and security convulsions which have become cyclical. There have been coups and counter coups. There have been political assassinations. Above all, there have been the repeated use of mercenaries by one group or another. All these have created serious setbacks for the stability and security of the islands. And they have definitely significantly contributed to the impoverishment of the Islands.

As you meet here to deliberate on this latest crisis, it is important to bear this historical fact in mind. It is time to change the terrible image of the islands. It is time to close the chapter of a Comoros being identified with permanent insecurity and instability. It is time to create conditions for the people of the Comoros to live in peace, stability and security. And if any gathering can make a significant contribution to that effect, it is this conference. I hope and pray that the distinguished representatives here present will not let this opportunity pass.

Throughout its turbulent history, the Comoros has always been assured of one thing. It is the solidarity and support of Africa and its continental organization, the OAU, in overcoming its successive crises. This solidarity, this concern and this support is what has prompted the OAU to act and to do what it can in efforts to overcome the current crisis. We have done so on our own. We have also done so in close cooperation

with other members and institutions notably the League of Arab States and the United Nations. The presence in our midst of observers from the League of Arab States, the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Conference, the European Union, the countries of the region, the Central Organ of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council and others demonstrates the commitment of Africa and the international community at large to help in overcoming the crisis.

I want however to underscore that our role – all of us who wish the Comoros and its people well – is to be helpful and supportive. We cannot substitute ourselves for the people of the islands. Yes, Africa cares about the Comoros. Yes, the world is concerned. But the caring and concern which is most crucial is that of the Comorians themselves. They have to put the interest of the country above all else. They have to do so working together as members of a family.

In dealing with this unfortunate crisis which has brought all of us to this conference, it is obvious that mistakes were made. They were made by the Anjouanese leaders as well as by the Federal Government. As we look ahead, it is important to be cognisant of these mistakes – some of which have dramatically aggravated the crisis. You should not however

allow yourselves to be prisoners of those mistakes. Rather you should look ahead and agree on a framework which provides a new beginning and a new hope for all the people of the Islands that constitute the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros.

In convening this conference, the OAU has only one overriding consideration. This is how to assist in resolving the current crisis and to create conditions for tackling the real crisis facing the Islands – the very difficult socio-economic conditions that exist in all the Islands from Anjouan to Moheli and Grand Comoro. We believe that unless the issue of poverty and underdevelopment is seriously addressed, the islands will continue to be faced with instability. Cognisant of this reality, the OAU working in tandem with the League of Arab States, the European Union, the United Nations and others is determined to mobilize international support and assistance for socio-economic development of the Comoros with particular focus that such assistance should benefit all the Islands.

However, first things first. We must urgently overcome the current crisis, create an enabling environment for understanding and cooperation among the islanders which is essential for the return of peace and stability. If this is accomplished, then the mobilization of support and resources will follow.

In dealing with the current crisis, the OAU does not have any specific prescription. How the impasse can be overcome is the challenge which confronts the participants of this conference. We have no ready made solutions. We are however going to be very attentive listeners. As and when appropriate, we shall be prepared to offer some suggestions. What I am trying to emphasize is that the solution to the Comorian crisis can only be decisively provided by the people of the Islands themselves through their representatives. It cannot be imposed from outside.

You should consult and agree on the best framework on which the future of your country can be based. In doing so, you should take into account two fundamental factors. These are on the one hand to address and accommodate the *legitimate concerns and interests of all the islands*. On the other hand, *the need to preserve the unity and territorial integrity of the country* which is important not only for the Comoros but for the continent as a whole. The OAU and the entire international community here represented are at one on this. I hope and trust that you will seriously take into account this concern and consensus position of Africa, the Arab world and the international community at large as you deliberate on how to overcome the current crisis and create a new dispensation which will usher in a new chapter for the Comoros.

The next few days of your meeting are going to be crucial not just for the success of this conference but more importantly for the future of your country and people. I appeal to you to make effective use of this opportunity and rise beyond selfish, sectional or group interest and put national consideration at the top of your agenda. You are all sons and daughters of the Comoros with a lot in common. You should treat each other as such. You should have frank discussion but in a serene atmosphere. Africa and all your friends will be with you and beside you.

This conference is being held in Africa Hall. The historic and symbolic significance of this place should not be lost. This is where African leaders, year in year out, have met to deliberate and plan for the future of this continent. This is where they have strived to consolidate the unity of our people, the cohesion of our societies and the emancipation of our continent. Crucial decisions affecting the destiny of our continent have been taken in this very hall. It is therefore my sincere hope that the participants of this conference will be inspired by the vision and determination of the founding fathers of our Organization and the leaders that have followed them. It is my hope that when we conclude our deliberations, we would have witnessed greater understanding, greater cohesion and greater solidarity among the peoples of the Comoros.