

STATEMENT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU,
H.E. SALIM AHMED SALIM, AT THE OPENING
SESSION OF THE AFRICAN MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE
ON THE ENVIRONMENT - 5TH SESSION
26 NOVEMBER 1993

ADDIS ABABA
ETHIOPIA

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H.E. Tamrat Layne,

Prime Minister of the Transitional Government of
Ethiopia,

Mr. Abdoulaye Bathily, Minister of Environment and
the Protection of Nature of the Republic of Senegal
and Chairman of the African Ministerial Conference
on the Environment (AMCEN),

Honourable Ministers,

Mr. Layeshi Yaker, Under Secretary General of the United
Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission
for Africa,

Ms. Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Under Secretary-General of
The United Nations and Executive Director of UNEP,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I wish to begin by expressing special appreciation and
gratitude to His Excellency, Mr. Tamrat Layne, Prime Minister of
the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, for finding time to
participate in the opening ceremony of the 5th Session of AMCEN
and to address the August Assembly despite his heavy schedule.

I am sure I speak on behalf of you all if I thank him for this gesture which is, indeed, an illustration of Ethiopia's commitment to Africa's efforts at sustainable development of the African region through, especially combatting desertification and mitigating the effects of drought and all other kinds of disaster on the continent.

I would also like to pay special tribute to our collaborators and partners from the UN specialized Agencies and programmes most of whom although attending AMCEN for the first time, have made substantial contribution to the activities of AMCEN, most especially in the preparations of this Conference. In this regard, I should like to welcome Madam Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UNEP.

Mr. Chairman,

Your meeting is taking place eighteen months after the historic United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1993. In this regard, you will recall that the OAU in collaboration with the Joint Secretariat Organizations, namely, ECA, UNEP, UNSO and ADB provided the necessary technical and financial support in the preparation of the African Common Position on Environment and Development presented at the Rio Earth Summit. Africa stated with one voice that the issues of environmental conservation and the protection of nature, with particular reference to recurrent African drought and desertification, were one of the major impediments to Africa's sustainable development and its goal of poverty eradication. As we meet today, it is encouraging to note that the recommendation of our Common Position are, indeed, reflected in UNCED Agenda 21.

In the wake of post Rio, there is a need to do a post mortem

on the Summit itself in general and in particular, the various commitments made by African Member States and the donor community as regards the African common position and its implementation at the national, sub-regional and regional levels.

I am raising these issues because, over the years, after each international sectoral Summit or conference we invariably raised the expectations of our peoples at the local, and national levels. And yet in the 1990s when we look around us, the reality at the local and national levels of our countries problems such as of the debt crisis, civil strife, of drought, desertification, and natural and man-induced disasters as well as the crisis of refugees and displaced populations, continue to impact negatively on the continent.

The first global conference on the **Human Environment** held in Stockholm in 1972, the World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by the former Norwegian Prime Minister, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland and the latest conference on environment and development, UNCED, held in Rio de Janeiro, were all important developments.

All these conferences on Environment and Development reflect a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level specially at the national policy level, including at the sub-regional organizations levels.

The reality however, has been that these commitments expressed with consensus at international fora have not been reflected in terms of concrete programmes, and budgetary commitments especially at the grassroot level. It is at this level that the majority of the population is faced everyday with the environmental realities of rural/urban migration, drought, desertification, disasters, refugees and displaced person, and at which we ought to focus our attention.

Mr. Chairman,
Honourble Ministers,

In tackling our development problems in general and, in this case, environmental conservation, the protection of nature and its management in particular, difficulties have been caused by the marginalization of the important role that African research and scientific communities as well as NGOs and grassroot organizations could play.

For the decade ahead, we in Africa should review our approach to issues. We should emphasize decentralization, encourage the participation of research and academic communities to find "home grown" African solutions to African problems. We should encourage the participation of the masses in the political and development process. If we fail to bring development path, we will continue to be a continent of crisis.

Mr Chairman, Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me turn to specific issues related to AMCEN . In doing so, I should like first and foremost to point out that solutions to Africa's problems, whether in the field of environment or in the political sphere, lie, essentially with the Africans themselves. Assistance from outside, whether from international Organizations or from the donor community, can only compliment but should not substitute the efforts of the African peoples themselves.

I, sincerely believe that this was the spirit in which AMCEN was established in Cairo in 1985. This was also the spirit behind the decision of African members of UNEP Governing Council in May 1983, to invite the Governments of Africa to convene an African

Environmental Conference to discuss national environmental priorities and to identify common problems worthy of a Regional Programme of Action to deal with serious environmental problems facing the African region.

Subsequently, the first session of AMCEN adopted the Cairo Programme to mobilize national, sub-regional and regional cooperation on the environment, emphasizing operational aspects so as to mobilize available national and international capabilities towards the effective implementation and follow-up of the programme. The priorities which were included in the programme reinforced those that were recognized by earlier African documents including the Regional Food Plan for Action, the Tenth Conference of the African Ministers of Agriculture of 1978 endorsed by the Lagos Summit in 1980, the Lagos Plan of Action 1980 and other similar documents. The programme was, therefore, expected to consolidate the initiatives Africa had taken towards economic reconstruction and development.

But, since 1990 a number of reviews have been carried out to assess and address the problems that have faced the Conference since its inception in 1985. In 1992 an Extraordinary meeting of the Bureau was of the view that there was an imperative need for a renewed political commitment and the 5th session was therefore expected to come up with strategies to revitalize the Conference so that the objectives set out in 1985 can be realised. We are told that the programme of AMCEN as set out in Cairo 1985, which essentially based on operational activities within which framework the programme was developed could not be realised due to the lack of financial resources, manpower and institutional constraints. I share the view that there is need for a shift in emphasis from the operational focus to that of providing political support and policy guidance for environmental programmes in the region.

This shift is, indeed, necessary, because of the two major developments. The first has to do with the establishment of the

African Economic Community and the second relates to the activities that Africa must take in the implementation of the African Common Position on Environment and Development presented to the Earth Summit in Rio and clearly articulated in UNCED agenda 21. What AMCEN should now do is to translate those commitments into Action Programmes and activities at the local, national, sub-regional and regional levels.

There is now, more than ever, the need for a mechanisms to allow people to express their views on issues that affect them. We should try within AMCEN to localize the global commitments we made under the UNCED. AMCEN has the very important responsibility to move the UNCED debate and commitments from the global level to the local and national levels. After all strategies for the implementation of agenda 21 must, of necessity, begin at the national level.

Another point I should like to share with you is the expected relationship between the AMCEN, and the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community. AMCEN will have to be viable regional framework within the larger ambit of the Community, for coordinating environmental programmes and activities at all levels in the continent.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Ministers

The last observation I would like to share with you, is indeed the role of AMCEN in disaster prevention, preparedness and response in Africa. To us in the OAU, drought, desertification, floods and cyclone, locusts and epidemics are some of the natural disasters that have confronted Africa over the years. Man-made disasters including wars, civil strife, problems of refugees and displaced peoples have added and compounded situations of disasters on the continent. While, in the area of man-made disasters we have been able to establish regional mechanism for

conflict prevention, management, and resolution we have unfortunately, not able to establish a comparable regional mechanism for disaster prevention, management and response.

I should in this regard add that while sustainable development cannot be achieved in a situation of environmental imbalances, no sustainable development can be achieved in a situation of constant disasters. It is, therefore, incumbent upon AMCEN to explore mechanisms and measures to deal with the environmental related disasters more effectively and in a coordinated approach.

In conclusion let me stress the importance of all of us working together towards the achievement of our common objective. In this respect, the Organization of African Unity looks forward to the continued cooperation and support of all the UN Agencies within their specialized fields and respective mandates. At the same time we shall continue to collaborate very closely within the joint Secretariat so that all of us collectively can live up to the general expectations of our peoples on this crucial issue of environment and sustained development.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish you a successful conference.