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ADDRESS DELIVERED BY H.E. SALIM AHMED SALIM
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU AT THE OPENING
CEREMONY OF THE CONSTITUENT CONGRESS
OF THE PAN AFRICAN WRITERS UNION
ACCRA, GHANA, 7 - 11 NOVEMBER 1989

Mr. Chairman,
Your Excellency Mr. Justice Annan & Members of PNDC,
PNDC Members,
Distinguished Secretaries of State,
Excellencies Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

In this world, in both time and space, there are events which leave their imprint in the history of a given society. Such events are epochmaking, and are remembered as milestones across the vast terrain that man has traversed during his long march in quest of self-realisation.

This rendez-vous of African Writers in Accra is such an event. Indeed, gathered here are African Writers from all literary disciplines, from all the corners of our continent, enthusiastic, expectant, and fraternally united to fulfill one single aspiration - to serve Mother Africa, and give expression to her muffled voice.

In response to the call enshrined in Resolution AHG/165 of the 23rd Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, you talented sons and daughters of Africa have come to reaffirm your commitment to the on-going struggle to project the African image, to challenge yourselves to the objective of ushering in a new era of Africa's total emancipation from the Shackles of under-development, neo-colonialism and apartheid. You have come to assure yourselves of the pioneering role you intend to play in this crucial phase of the African liberation struggle. Indeed you saw it rightly fitting to come to Ghana, the land of freedom, the land of Kwame Nkrumah, the land of Jerry Rawlings, this land which played the historic role of the harbinger of the African revolution.

Characteristic of their traditions, our brothers and sisters in Ghana have spared no effort in extending warm hospitality and fraternal welcome to the participants and the Secretariat, and ensuring the efficient conduct of the deliberations now about to take place. I want to thank them and I am sure I reflect the sentiments of all participants in the respect.

Your Excellency,

By offering to host this historic Congress in Africa, the Government of Ghana has given full expression to the profundity of its commitment to the cause of the African Writer. We are therefore deeply grateful to the Government and People of Ghana, for the historic opportunity

afforded us. Allow me, on behalf of all the participants and the OAU General Secretariat, to express our profound gratitude for the personal assistance of the Chairman of PNDC and Head of State of Ghana in the preparation and organisation of this Congress.

I have no shred of doubt that this Congress will be crowned with success. The time will arrive, when posterity will reconstruct the history of our ancient Continent, and it shall not fail to be mentioned that the great creation we are about to witness came into being under your patronage.

Distinguished delegates to the Congress,

You no doubt vividly recall that in Brazzaville from 25 to 31 May 1987, during the International Literary Symposium against Apartheid you decided to condemn the atrocities of Apartheid and demonstrate your unflinching solidarity with our brothers and sisters of Southern Africa. The conclusions of your deliberations were brought to the attention of the OAU Heads of State and Government in their 25th Session in July 1989. They congratulated you sincerely on your courageous and commendable initiative. But that now belongs to the past. For the moment, the OAU is urging you to make further efforts, to galvanise your energies and show by your reflections that you are not outside the mainstream of the African revolution, and that you share the preoccupations of the broad masses of the African people. The serious crisis besetting our continent is not confined to our Governments. The economic crisis now confronting us, with its all-pervading influence on the entire social fabric of African Society, demands the contribution of each and all of us. You will have noticed no doubt that Africa, more than any other region in the world, is widely and deeply afflicted by the negative effects of the present economic regression that the continent is going through. The only thing that changes with the passing of the years is the magnitude and urgency of this dire situation. Where therefore does our salvation lie? It lies in a courageous reversal of the current trend and in a break with the past in many spheres. All this was asserted by the Monrovia Symposium on Africa's development prospects which states that "the primary objective of development is to create the material and cultural environment conducive to development and creative participation". I challenge you, that African Writers have a role to play in this continental task.

The magnitude and complexity of the task ahead demand the irrevocable commitment and active involvement of all the sons and daughters of our continent. You, Writers, have an essential role to play not only as the custodians of our culture, but also as men and women of vision who portray for us the ideal society that we must strive to build.

It is obvious indeed that no society can do without both culture and vision. Recent analyses have shown that the failure of our development efforts partly arises from the

fact that we have given prominence to the accumulation of wealth to the neglect of man and his cultural creativity.

We need to combat this narrow approach, the product of today's consumerism. Material and quantitative growth alone cannot be the essence of the ideal society that Africa is trying to construct. We should husband the human virtues that Africans traditionally cherish. Although it is easy to quantify the collapse of commodity prices, the cutback in official development assistance, and evaluate the decline in the terms of trade, it is practically impossible to compute the impact of cultural imperialism and the alienation of our youth. Time there was when western civilization was projected as the sole model while the culture of others was relegated to the rank of folklore. Today the trend is changing. In 1982, the UNESCO General Conference held in Mexico underlined that culture is a basic factor in the life of every individual, every community.

We in Africa stated this truth as far back as 1976 when we adopted the Cultural Charter for Africa. We said then that "the assertion of our cultural identity is a reflection of shared concern of all African peoples".

In Africa today, thanks also to your efforts, things are gradually changing. The African is re-discovering the virtues of his or her traditions and the beauty of the local languages. We are definitely on course to African mental liberation. But the damage done by centuries of cultural domination, is far too extensive to be reversed overnight. It will require coordinated efforts by your Writers, Governments and organization like ours.

The Governments of Africa will have to provide the conditions necessary for intellectual creativity and freedom of expression. The governments will have to work hand in hand with you opinion makers to rally and mobilize African masses for the development of Africa. Writers do in turn have to use their immense power of influence to farther and promote African ideals and bring into sharper focus the problems of our continent. This is a role which must be played responsibly.

I am aware of the difficult environment in which you operate. Reasons of political limitations and levels of illiteracy and lack of infrastructure sometime mitigate against your access to many people in Africa especially in rural areas. But even in urban areas, in circumstances of critical economic situations, newspapers and books are usually the first casualties on the family shopping list. But even with these odds against you, you have tried to reach out to people in our continent and beyond.

These physical aspects of the material conditions in which you function, are not the only limitations to your access to people. I would like to suggest to you that perhaps time has come for you to look into possibilities of using local languages more and more as your medium. For how

more can you appeal to the basic instincts of your general readership, or appeal to their deepest sentiments if not in the use of a local linguistic medium? At the very least, you could endeavour to arrange to have your writings translated into local languages. I am of course aware of the economic considerations which could work against such arrangements especially considering that the publishing industry is dominated by companies and individuals of Europe and America who do not share these concerns. But has time not come for us in International Organizations, Governments and you Writers to sit together with African publishers and work something out ?

Your mission takes on a wider dimension in that you have to educate our peoples, make them aware of their developmental responsibilities and roles, cultivate in them our African Cultural values and ensure the social cohesion of our continent. It is incumbent upon you, given your intellectual endowments to promote our culture, propagate it and give it its rightful place in the domain of arts and literature especially during this World Decade for cultural Development. I must hasten to observe that the social fabric of our continent has come under immense strain owing not only to the deteriorating economic situation but also to the unprecedented pace of urbanisation that has resulted in the burgeoning of shanty and mega-cities. Now, the most treasured of African institutions, the extended family, is threatened with disintegration. All this offers tremendous challenge to the African Writers. Your essential task must be to diagnose the malaise of our society, kindle optimism where there is pessimism, and provide hope where there is despair.

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This has been the mission of the Writer at all times. Literature projects many images of the Writer. In Africa he or she is known as the creator with a lofty mission, the bearer of cultural torch. Allow me then to add yet another mission, that is the struggle for the total emancipation of our Continent from the forces of neo-colonialism and against Apartheid, "that crime against humanity". As his Excellency President Abdou Diouf told you at the Brazzaville Symposium-"Your crusade will not be in vain. Your mind has forged the weapon, the wounded pride of millions of men, women and children has sharpened it. Your weapon is formidable because it will keep rattling until Apartheid has fallen".

Ladies and Gentlemn,

History is in the making in Southern Africa and we all can rightly feel proud to have contributed to making it happen. Today elections have begun in Namibia. It is the start of a process leading to the eventual independence of that tormented territory in April next year. The stage we have reached is crucial and we can, with guarded optimism, look forward to Independence Day in Windhoek. But we must remain vigilant against the machinations of the

Apartheid regime of South Africa. Only last week we witnessed another of its characteristic subterfuges. It fabricated allegations that SWAPO was amassing troops along the Namibia-Angola border in order to preempt the holding of free and fair elections.

But whether in Namibia or in South Africa itself, what we have been able to achieve has in large measure been a direct result of people mobilization. And you Writers have been the mainstay of that campaign. Without you, politicians Governments, groups or individuals in support of the just cause in South Africa, would not have put their message across. Without you and your colleagues in other parts of the world, the sufferings of the people of that region, would not have broken out of the walls of Apartheid. I urge you to stay the course and step up your vigilance.

Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We in the General Secretariat are fully aware that your task, though noble, is not a easy one. This is graphically portrayed by the words of one of Africa's writers, Nelson Mandela prior to his imprisonment.

"I hope to be able to live for that ideal and achieve it, but if need be I am prepared to die for that ideal".

Indeed for that same ideal, I urge you to remain united and not to leave Accra before you have founded the Pan-African Writers Union. I am aware that the International Committee and the Preparatory Committee have facilitated your task with excellent working documents. I should like therefore to pay fraternal and sincere tribute to the authors of those documents, and especially to brothers Atu Kwei Okai and Tati Loutard.

I wish this Congress resounding success in the task now before it.

I thank you.