



Organization of African Unity

**Statement by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary General
of the Organization of African Unity at the 2nd Congress of the
Pan-African Writers' Association**

**Accra International Conference Center
5th November 1999**

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AT THE 2ND CONGRESS OF THE PAN-AFRICAN WRITERS
ASSOCIATION – ACCRA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
CENTRE - 5TH NOVEMBER 1999**

**Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

I wish to convey my congratulations to the Pan African Writers Association on the occasion of the 10th anniversary since its founding. In November 1989, exactly ten years ago, I had the opportunity of addressing the Opening Ceremony of the Constituent Congress of the African Writers Union. In my statement, I had *inter alia* urged the participants not to leave Accra without creating a body that brings them together. It is gratifying to recognize that you did not only create an association for African writers, but you have managed to sustain and consolidate it for the past ten years.

I would like to thank the Organizers for inviting me to join you here today. This occasion provides an opportunity not only for celebrating the birth and growth of an association, but also for paying tribute to creativity, knowledge, art, and for rededicating

ourselves to using these faculties in shaping the destiny of our Continent.

Allow me, once more, to extend my appreciation and that of my delegation, to the Government and the people of the Republic of Ghana for the warm welcome and hospitality that has been extended to us since our arrival. Every time I return to Ghana, I develop an irresistible inspiration by the experience of seeing in the people and the leadership of this country a fusion between the strength of Africa's collective past and the prospects of its future. No wonder your association has chosen this country to be the home of its headquarters.

When I addressed your constituent assembly 10 years ago, I was coming from Namibia where processes that would lead to the termination of apartheid South Africa's illegal occupation of that country and its eventual independence were still underway. The apartheid regime in South Africa was still in power. Our Continent as a whole was still reeling from the aftermath of prolonged regression. The world as a whole was beginning to undergo fundamental changes.

A lot has happened since then, both within our Continent and in the world at large. Namibia is now independent; South Africa

has a new democratic dispensation; Nelson Mandela became free, assumed the leadership of his country, and voluntarily retired and giving way for the election of his successor in the person of President Thabo Mbeki through a democratic election. At the same time however, we are also faced by a new set of problems, including the scourge of conflicts and the AIDS pandemic.

At the global level, the cold war is over and there is a new realignment of forces. Ways of accumulating wealth have also been changing. New threats and potentials have emerged.

As Africans, we are entering the new century, and the beginning of a new millennium, amidst a new constellation of forces and challenges. These circumstances have been compelled to clear our vision, to mobilize ourselves, and to galvanize our energies. In order to avert the threats and harness the potentials, we have embarked on a process of repositioning our Continent by consolidating collective strengths and taking deliberate measures aimed at eliminating conflicts and instability. Kwame Nkrumah's poignant call for a Unified Africa, which is at peace with itself, is now the rallying appeal.

All along, African writers have been in the vanguard of the Continental revolution, and their performance has been exemplary. Once again, I wish to pay tribute to the writers of our Continent, in their various domains, for the courageous and invaluable contribution they have made to the liberation struggle. to the process of nation building and to the preservation of cultural identity. In every medium of communication and at every locale, the writer has been the most faithful reflector of the conscience of society. In the most creative way, the African writer has been able to engage the society into a discourse that has a meaning and relevance to life as it is understood, as it is lived and as it is desired.

As one looks back at modern Africa reasserting itself, the contribution of the writer remains indelible. Whether it is through the fictional novel or the political treatise, the poem or the play, the film script or the journalist's report, the African writer was able to expose the tension arising from the encounter of colonialism with our indigenous cultures. They were able to underscore the importance of emancipating political consciousness as the *sine-qua-non* for the socio-economic and political liberation of society. Indeed, they were even able to articulate a clear vision for society. On the whole, the writer remained in step with Africa's agenda for much of the 20th century.

We are now about to enter the new century with new challenges, new opportunities and new threats. The triumphant completion of the struggle against colonialism and apartheid has allowed the continent to concentrate on the process of social and economic development. This new direction of continental efforts is taken amidst a context in which effectiveness in global transactions can be enhanced only through stronger integration and closer cooperation. It is in this regard, that two months ago, an Extra-Ordinary Summit of the OAU held in Sirte, Libya, decided to establish an African Union by the year 2001 and to accelerate the pace of continental integration by expediting the implementation of the African Economic Community.

Apart from the practical implications of bringing about an instrument that will enhance Africa's performance capacity, the significance of the Sirte Declaration is its concrete reaffirmation of the spirit of Pan-Africanism that is anchored at the level of the people. As we embark on implementing this decision, African writers have a critical role to play. Due to your field of competence and your close link with the masses you are best positioned to popularize the decision and, in your own creative ways, to generate a constructive discourse on its operational implications.

By engaging the public on the theme of Pan-Africanism and integration, you will contribute to giving ownership of this project to its rightful custodians, the People of this continent. Indeed, while the legal instruments and institutional mechanisms of integration are important tools of fostering the proposed African Union, the critical force remains to be the goodwill and interaction among the people and their leadership. The writer's narrative has proved to be an effective tool for reaching out and, if effectively deployed, it can make a difference.

Another area of pertinent concern in the development of the Continent today, is the scourge of conflict. During the past decade, there has been a proliferation of conflicts causing colossal loss of life, horrific injuries, and massive destruction of property. The resultant effect has been chronic instability and disruption of development in strategic parts of the Continent, suffering and displacement of communities – mostly women and children, and destruction of continental resources and assets. There is a whole generation growing in some parts of the Continent without having an idea of what it is to live in peace. There are millions who have been condemned to an almost perpetual state of refugees. And in a place like Somalia, where there is no government, the whole society is held ransom by warlords.

Important steps are being taken by the Continental Organization, the Regional Economic Communities, as well as by our respective governments. Nevertheless, here again, the African writer can play an important role in dealing with the challenge of fostering peace, security and stability in the continent. By engaging the people in a creative understanding of the causes of conflict, ways of predicting their explosion, and means of preventing and containing them, African writers will make a substantial contribution to the continental efforts towards this end. Above all, African writers can help in the creation of a culture of tolerance and peace in our societies

Similarly, the democratization process has now gathered momentum in the continent. There is a genuine effort to expand political space so as to enable all actors to be effectively involved in the public affairs of society. There has been remarkable progress achieved in the last decade, but more needs to be done in terms of building institutions and promoting a democratic culture. As educators, informers and entertainers, African writers can add thrust to the democratization process in the Continent in the same way they contributed to the struggle for liberation and cultural development.

In the social front, the AIDS pandemic has become a major threat to the lives of our people and the very survival of our Continent. Its victims are the most productive segment of the Continent's population. Yet, experience has shown that when society has been open about this pandemic and confronted it head-on, there has been some hope of containing it. In this respect, African writers, when adequately prepared, are in the best position to help society deal with this silent vicious and devastating killer.

As we consider all these and other challenges facing our Continent and peoples, the issue of gender equality becomes particularly relevant as we enter the new century. In many of our societies, women, who constitute a substantial proportion of the population, are denied their rightful position in the governance and development processes. Such a situation not only impedes the rapid development of the Continent, but it also engenders injustice within societies. It is important for African writers to take up this issue as a collective challenge. It should not be left to women writers only.

I recognize that all this is quite a tall order for the African writer. However, the beauty of creativity is its diversity and multiplicity. By drawing your attention to a wider landscape, I am merely urging you to unleash your energies and direct them to this

wider horizon. I am appealing to you to renew your critical interests and devote your faculties to issues of continental concern and preoccupation.

In the course of dealing with your existential reality and the intervening challenges, it is important not to neglect the medium itself. As the custodians of the art and science of Writing, you have a responsibility of preserving the tool, consolidating it and disseminating it to future generations. As a living thing, you should maintain its dynamism in whatever language you are working on and whichever area of your competence. While you should always strive for higher standards, you should also not permit the art of writing to degenerate into some esoteric jargon for the exclusive few. The essence of writing is its accessibility, and popular appeal. This is particularly so, if writing it to be used as a tool for change.

The aftermath of the economic regression that we suffered in the 1980s has been the erosion of the important achievements that our countries had made earlier. Among the areas of attrition has been the level of literacy, as well as the ability to produce and procure reading materials. I am aware that this has constituted a serious impediment for you as African writers, and you have found

it very difficult to concentrate on this vocation because of the attendant poor market appeal within the continent.

We expect that the advent and progress in information and communication technology will lead to the lowering of production cost in the writing trade. I do realize that among the themes you had planned to explore in the workshops is about the writer and new technologies. Hopefully through your dialogue you may discover some means and ways of harnessing this new technology so that it can promote economic sustainability within the vocation and also it can help you in disseminating your output across the Continent.

I would like to conclude by reiterating the challenge facing Africa as we prepare to enter the new century. This challenge faces you as individual writers, as it faces your Association – an institution which the Organization of African Unity has been particularly happy to support and promote.

As indicated in my address, while the challenge is multi-faceted, it boils to what we expect Africa to be in the new millennium and what is the role of an African as we enter the new century.

I am confident that you will live up to the challenge, and in the process you will be able to situate properly, your role as writers and that of the Continent, in this new and highly competitive world. Furthermore, in meeting this challenge, I also hope that you will remain in the forefront in the preservation of all that is positive in our culture and traditions, and all that enhances our collective humanity.

I wish you all the success in the deliberations of your second congress.

I thank you.