



**SECOND SANI ABACHA FOUNDATION
ANNUAL LECTURE**

**"CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND
RESOLUTION IN AFRICA"**

**Lecture by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
Secretary General
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**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE
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**“CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND
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DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM, SECRETARY GENERAL
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Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish, from the start, to say how much I appreciate the invitation extended to me to be the Guest Speaker at the “Second Sani Abacha Foundation Annual Lecture”. This is particularly so, given the fact that the Foundation is dedicated to the promotion of social harmony and conflict resolution among the various human communities in the world, especially Africa. I believe that Foundations like this and other non-Governmental Institutions on the continent can play a catalytic role in supporting the efforts being deployed in the promotion of peace, security and stability in the continent.

I have been asked to speak on the subject, "Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in Africa". I should like to point out that this is one of the major preoccupations for us in the OAU. We are all aware that conflicts are causing havoc, destruction and devastation in our continent and seriously undermining our efforts at promoting the wellbeing of our people. Above all, these conflicts do not only inflict pain, suffering and misery to millions of Africans but at times indict our very humanity.

I find it particularly opportune to discuss this topic here in Abuja, the Federal capital of a country which has played and continues to play such a vital role in Africa's efforts at overcoming the scourge of conflicts. I consider the role played by the Federal Republic of Nigeria as a logical extension of its equally crucial role in support of the liberation struggle of our continent. For, if the struggle for freedom was in essence the struggle for the restoration of the dignity of our people, it would be inconsistent and indeed unacceptable to remain indifferent or complacent to the new threat and challenge against our collective dignity and security, which conflicts in Africa clearly represent.

At the beginning of this decade, we all witnessed the upsurge of devastating conflicts, a kind of conflict hitherto unknown in this continent's post-independent era for its cruelty and intensity; carnage and mayhem. We have wondered and still continue to wonder how man can inflict such inhuman treatment on his fellow man and what it is that can make man descend to such levels. How can one possibly explain the genocide in Rwanda?

Why is it that Africa has over the last decade become a major theatre of conflicts? We may not be able to concretely establish the underpinning causes of these conflicts. There are, however, general assumptions or factors underlying such conflicts. These factors can be economic, ethnic, social, religious or political. Any one of them or a combination of some of them can give rise to a conflict and the conflicts in Africa generally reflect these trends. These factors become sources of conflict only when they are manipulated for the benefit of individuals, groups and communities to the exclusion of others.

In Africa, one of the major sources of conflict is the inequitable distribution of resources and power at the national level. Clearly, when the resources of a country are unfairly allocated to the various segments of the society and when power is concentrated in the hands of a group or clique, and when the rights of people are trampled upon, then a trivial incident could ignite the flame.

The point has been made that poverty is the cause of most conflicts in the developing countries. Many of the poorest countries in the world have experienced conflict since the 1980s. That may well be so, but that is not to say that conflict is the exclusive preserve of the poor. It cannot be said that in Africa the countries that are beset by conflicts are the poorest. That is certainly an oversimplification. What can be said to be true though is that poverty prepares the ground for conflicts to develop. Furthermore, what is not in doubt is that conflicts are both a cause and an effect of impoverishment.

Mention has also been made of the democratization process in Africa. Normally, this process is supposed to be a healing process, to resolve conflicts. Unfortunately, at times, it has produced its own tensions and conflicts in parts of Africa where the new lease of freedom has led to the

revival of old and dormant conflicts. We should not, however, be discouraged by such developments. It is even better that such issues that had been swept under the carpet should now be brought into the open in the confident hope that a lasting solution would be found as the democratic process gains root in the continent.

As we proceed and must proceed on this path, we have to be conscious of the problems inherent in the transition from a single-party system and centralised economy to pluralism and free market economy and the accompanying social disparities and imbalances. These, at times, have contributed to undermine the unity, solidarity and cohesion of our societies and generated conditions for outbreak of violence and conflicts. It is also a fact that conflict situations which might otherwise have been managed properly are often turned into conflagrations due to weak or poor leadership, political rivalries and sometimes personality problems. They are also, at times, exacerbated by external factors and interference.

We may not know all the reasons nor would we be able to estimate with any precision the cost of such conflicts in terms of human and material loss. We can only refer to millions of lives lost and colossal damage to property. These conflicts bring in their wake the displacement of populations and the creation of millions of refugees across the national

frontiers. Furthermore, many millions more of displaced persons are forced to be 'refugees' within their own countries.

As poor as we are, the path to development has been agonizingly slow, the little we have been able to achieve has been the result of an enormous sacrifice. When conflicts occur, the achievements of decades of economic and social development are wiped out within a matter of months, weeks, even hours. The beautiful city of Brazzaville, in the Republic of Congo is today a clear picture of destruction. Instead of going forward to rebuild the country, they must now go back to put the pieces together. While it is possible to rebuild the city and the country, it is impossible to bring back to life those who were torn apart by the bullets. What cost can be more painful than this? No doubt, we can ask ourselves whether this tragedy and others could not have been avoided.

That is not all. When these conflicts are mercifully brought to an end, they leave scars, both psychological and physical, extremely difficult to repair. They sometimes remain permanent. Women, children, the aged and the weak, are more often than not the real victims of such conflicts. Just reflect on the horrendous nightmare they go through almost on daily basis, either in captivity or in their efforts to escape. Even those who

manage to escape are condemned to an indeterminate existence elsewhere as second class human beings.

Long after the guns have been silenced, the killing fields remain the same as landmines carry on the war, killing and tearing the limbs of our youth. Then also, we are saddled with whole generations which have grown up in a culture of armed warfare and violence. How do we repair such damage? Those who caused such havoc have no idea about how to repair the damage. All they know is how to destroy.

It is against the background of such stark and painful realities that the OAU and African countries in general are currently preoccupied with not just the resolution of conflicts but, more importantly, with the early prevention and management of conflicts and conflictual situations. A definite solution to the scourge of conflicts will hinge on the elaboration of national mechanisms which ensure equity and justice in our countries. Once people are not threatened or marginalized, once they have full equal access and opportunity to the due process of the law, once they feel included and can participate in the political governance of their country; once they are confident that the country holds promise and a future for them and their children; and above all, once they feel safe and are not forced to vote with their feet, conflicts will become a remote possibility.

It is in this light and because of our fundamental belief that peace and stability are the determinants of economic development and social progress that the OAU Heads of State and Government decided in 1993 to create within the OAU, a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution.

The Mechanism consists of the Central Organ comprising representatives of Member States as a political body and the Secretary General with the General Secretariat as the operational arm. It functions at the level of Ambassadors, Foreign Ministers and Heads of State. The overriding objective of the mechanism is to put at the disposal of Africa an institutional framework within which conflicts in the continent can be considered and resolved. The Mechanism is both an empowering instrument and a political statement that Africa is now more than ever before resolved to take the challenge and place itself at the centre of all efforts at resolving its conflicts.

The thrust of the mechanism is to identify conflictual situations early enough to be able to anticipate and prevent them before they degenerate into violent conflicts. As anticipating conflicts is not always possible, this should not prevent concerted efforts to develop and strengthen

internal mechanisms to support societies in their efforts to avoid conflict. We also recognize that fore-knowledge of tensions does not guarantee a successful strategy to defuse conflict. Nonetheless, recognition of the early manifestations of rising conflict may, in specific circumstances, provide windows for concerted efforts to be deployed and which could prove pivotal in the prevention of certain conflicts.

Since the adoption of the Mechanism, the OAU has been increasingly involved in conflict mediation activities, and in the implementation of a wide range of preventive measures. As a practical demonstration of these efforts, the OAU has used special Envoys/Representatives of the OAU Secretary General, on a sustained basis, in Burundi, Liberia, Rwanda and currently in the Comoros, providing the necessary support to the search for peace in these crisis situations.

In Rwanda following the outbreak of armed hostilities in October 1990 between the government of Rwanda and the forces of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). The OAU, working closely, with the neighbouring countries had deployed intensive efforts aimed at promoting a peaceful solution to the conflict. These efforts culminated in the signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement between the Government and the RPF in August 1993. As part of these efforts, the OAU maintained between

1990 and 1993 a Military Observer Mission in Rwanda. Against all odds, the force made up of officers and men from various African countries and commanded by Major General Opaleye of Nigeria did a commendable job. I was in Rwanda at the end of October 1993 to wind up the operations of the OAU Observer Group and to formally hand over to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), the implementation phase of the Arusha Peace Agreement.

In Burundi, following the dastardly assassination of Mr. Melchior Ndadaye, the democratically elected President of that country, in October 1993, the Organization of African Unity deployed a group of military observers and a civilian component under my Special Representative. The mandate of the group was there basically to help promote confidence between the parties and to contribute to the search for a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Despite its shortcomings, some of which were borne out of the lack of inadequate logistical support, the OAU Mission in Burundi (OMIB), in part, contributed to the lessening of political tensions and managed to carry out various humanitarian tasks. Currently, the OAU Mission in Burundi under the leadership of my Special Representative continues to do its utmost in promoting the peace process in that country.

In the Gabonese Republic, the OAU, at the invitation of President Bongo, played a mediation role between the opposition parties and the government. In the Republic of Congo before the recent civil armed conflict, the OAU had played a pivotal role through mediation efforts in preventing armed conflict following the elections of 1992. The tragic events of the last few months in that country demonstrate vividly the need for sustained and concerted peace-building efforts on the part of Africa and the international community in situations of heightened tension. In the Comoros, the OAU played a critical role in defusing the crisis in the Islands following a mercenary led coup d'état in 1995. Presently, the OAU is deeply involved in efforts aimed at overcoming the latest crisis in that country.

One of the measures deployed by the OAU in the prevention and management of conflicts has been in the area of election observation. In this context, the OAU has until now observed more than 60 elections and referenda held in many of our Member States. These observation missions, which are undertaken at the invitation of our Member States, have provided the OAU with a unique opportunity to contribute to the democratization process on the continent and have enabled us to build a confidence mechanism especially in situations where opposition parties are suspicious of incumbent governments. Our experience in dealing

with elections in our continent so far, have shown that beyond the elections, what is urgently needed is to reinforce democratic institutions and to promote a culture of tolerance, transparency, accountability and good governance. Inherent in this process of democratization is the creation of checks and balances to ensure a smooth exercise of power and control.

Experience has demonstrated that in order for Africa to deal effectively with conflict situations in the continent, it is imperative that it should enhance its peace-keeping and peace-making capacity. While the preference has always been and will continue that the deployment of peace-keeping operations should be the responsibility of the United Nations, it is clear that Africa should increasingly be prepared to undertake its own share of responsibility. More specifically it is important that African countries, which, in the past have made important contributions to the United Nations Peace-keeping Operations the world over, should also enhance their capacity and coordinate their activities so as to be able to make a vital contribution in the deployment of the peace-keeping forces in Africa.

It is on this basis and conscious of the reluctance on the part of the international community and more specifically the non-African countries

to get involved in African conflicts that African leaders meeting in Addis ababa, in June 1995, decided that military contingents should be earmarked in the national armed forces of our Member States which can be deployed in times of crisis and need essentially by the United Nations but in exceptional cases under the umbrella of the Organization of African Unity. The underlying consideration of this standby arrangement is to ensure that African peace-keeping forces can be deployed in conflict areas with improved reaction time which is vital in preventing large scale violence such as the events that led to the massacres and genocide in Rwanda. It is encouraging to note that there is considerable good will on the part of some members of the international community to support Africa in this endeavour.

In line with the OAU's standby arrangement concept, the Organization held in 1996, the first ever meeting of the African Army Chiefs of Defence Staff in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, which marked the beginning of Africa's effort to coordinate strategic planning for OAU peace-keeping. At the end of last month, the second meeting of the Chiefs of Defence Staff was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, where a number of recommendations were made, all geared towards the enhancement of Africa's peace-keeping capability.

The prevention, management and resolution of conflicts by the OAU also takes several forms. These include the involvement of the African leaders and the Secretary General of the Organization. In the recent past, our regional groupings have undertaken conflict prevention and resolution measures towards the prevention and resolution of various conflicts within their respective regions. The pre-emptive and preventive measures taken in the case of Lesotho by the Southern African leaders under the auspices of the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the crucial contribution by African Heads of State in defusing the crisis in Central African Republic; the efforts of the leaders of the Region in the case of Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire; the efforts of the International Mediation Committee with respect to the Republic of the Congo, the measures deployed and actions taken by the ECOWAS leaders in Liberia and the current joint actions being taken to restore constitutional legality in Sierra Leone are but some of the significant steps made by Africa to prevent and resolve conflicts within the continent.

The recent agreement in Conakry, Guinea involving the ECOWAS Committee of Five in which the OAU General Secretariat has been represented, and the military junta in Sierra Leone to restore the democratically elected President to power, once again, underscores the

importance of determined and united efforts in the achievement of peace on the continent. The particular case of Liberia where the efforts of leaders and people of Western African Region culminated in the holding of free and fair elections and the subsequent installation of a democratically elected President and parliament underscores the fact that where there is a will and firm determination, Africa's conflicts can be resolved. I recall that in 1990 in Banjul, when I attended the meeting of the Regional Leaders and where the setting up of a Regional Military Monitoring Group was agreed upon, some within the international community looked at it with scepticism and even derision. But the success so far scored by ECOMOG amply demonstrates what Africa can do for itself despite the limitations of funding and logistics.

At this juncture, I wish to pay particular tribute to the Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, His Excellency General Sani Abacha, for his unwavering commitment to the search for peace in Liberia and in the region. Nigeria's steadfastness, commitment and contribution to the cause of peace in the region would go down in history as one of the landmarks in Africa's determination to seek solutions to the continent's crisis and conflicts through dialogue.

I am confident that as Nigeria prepares itself for a transition to democratic governance, the same maturity, sacrifice and tolerance will be demonstrated by all the leaders and people of this great country. A peaceful democratic process in Nigeria would, no doubt, signal to the rest of the continent and, indeed, to the international community, Africa's readiness and commitment to assume its full responsibilities to the people of this continent. I am also confident that Nigeria will make the inevitable transition into the next century as a country that is at peace with itself and with the rest of the world; a country with a transparent democratic process, committed to good governance and respect for human rights and maintaining its Pan-African vision.

The prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in Africa had operated largely at the governmental level which in itself is crucial. But there is a growing recognition that conflicts in Africa can best be managed and, indeed, resolved when all the sectors of African society are fully involved and integrated in the process and would, in fact, play a complementary role.

The civil society in Africa like anywhere else in the world can and should play an important role in early warning and information gathering and analysis. The OAU, with its limited resources can rely on experts

and practitioners operating at the grass-roots level for such collaboration to be able to anticipate any potential conflict situations and thus together seek or take preventive measures. Equally important is the role that eminent persons and community leaders within the civil society can play as Mediators, Facilitators, Special Envoys and trainers all geared towards the prevention, management or resolution of conflicts on the continent.

We at the OAU have in fact made use of the expertise of such distinguished members of the civil society in the recent past and we intend to continue to benefit from such expertise in the future. Indeed, we are witnessing an increased interest on the part of the civil society to involve itself in the area of conflict prevention and resolution and many organizations have been established to promote this case. Today, many of these bodies are seeking institutional links with the OAU and I can assure you that we shall be willing partners. We, no doubt, need to coordinate our efforts and harness our resources for effective action to prevent and resolve conflicts.

In conflict situations, long after the guns have gone silent, to prevent any re-emergence, there always remains a number of issues which have to be addressed immediately and comprehensively. This is what is known as the post conflict phase which requires support for the transition from

conflict to not just peace but to sustainable peace in the affected country through the rebuilding of the socio-economic framework of the society. The cessation of hostilities is usually only the beginning of a long and delicate process, as reconstruction or rebuilding the affected country does not refer only to the reconstruction of physical infrastructure.

In countries that have experienced brutal armed conflict as was the case with Rwanda and Liberia, the process of reconstruction and reconciliation can be and is very long, painful and leaves scars which take generations to heal. The issues of the return, settlement and rehabilitation of refugees and displaced persons; the disarming and demobilization and subsequent training and reintegration of former combatants, especially child soldiers into civilian life as well as the rehabilitation of a traumatized population, in particular women and children, are but some of the post conflict peace building activities that must be addressed by Africa with the support of the international community.

In dealing with the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in Africa, certain questions cannot be over-emphasized. Experience has shown for example the importance of availability of resources on a sustained basis to support the various activities involved in

the process be it fielding purely civilian missions or peace observer missions involving the military or in a negotiation process.

The OAU had in some situations, to rely on its meager budget to fund its operations as was the case in Rwanda in 1990. In fact, the Government of Nigeria was most generous in providing logistical and financial support to the OAU Neutral Military Observer Group. In other cases, the OAU has benefited from contributions from our international partners and in limited cases, from Africa. In turn, the OAU General Secretariat has from time to time made symbolic financial contributions to support various initiatives and efforts being undertaken in various conflict affected countries in the continent.

I would now like to make a brief reference to an important element in our resource mobilization drive: the OAU Peace Fund. In recognition of the indispensability of funding for peace operations, be they civilian or military, African Heads of State and Government decided to establish a special fund now known as the "Peace Fund" for the purpose of providing financial resources to support exclusively the OAU operational activities relating to conflict management and resolution. This fund is made up of financial appropriations from the regular budget of the OAU, voluntary contributions from Member States as well as from other sources within

and outside Africa. As I have already stated, we have benefited from generous contributions from various countries. It is our ardent hope that this generosity would be emulated by not only other Member States of the OAU, but also by private African business entrepreneurs and ordinary Africans. After all, peace, stability and security in our countries and among our countries is and should be, the primary concern of all Africans.

In conclusion, I would like to underscore the indispensability of peace to the overall development of our countries and peoples. To this end, it is imperative that certain norms are observed within our respective countries and by the leadership of Africa. These include:

- the observance of basic human rights;
- the peaceful change of governments in accordance with collectively determined procedures;
- the peaceful resolution of violent conflicts within and between our States;
- the protection and integration of those who are disadvantaged; and the involvement and empowerment of our people and especially the women in the process of governance and development.

It is my firm belief that we are all collectively responsible for the peace and security of this continent. Let us, therefore, recommit ourselves to finding amicable solutions to our disputes and differences before they degenerate into violent conflicts. Let us avoid reacting only to fires after they are set. Experience has shown that this kind of approach seems to be not only unsatisfactory but, expensive in human and material terms. As we prepare ourselves to enter a new millennium, Africa must resolutely endeavour to keep its house in order. We must put an end to conflicts. We must effectively and decisively address the conditions which have perpetuated this plague in our continent. There is no alternative if we wish to make our continent a relevant and important factor in the international system of globalization and stiff competition which will clearly characterize the new millennium.

I thank you.