



Organization of African Unity

OPENING REMARKS BY
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OF THE OAU TO THE SEMINAR ON THE
ESTABLISHMENT, WITHIN THE OAU OF AN EARLY
WARNING SYSTEM ON CONFLICT SITUATIONS IN AFRICA

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**Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me from the outset, say how pleased I am to welcome such a distinguished gathering of eminent scholars, senior government officials, journalists and renowned internationalists. The fact that so many of you have found time to come to Addis Ababa and participate in this very important Seminar is, indeed, an eloquent manifestation of your individual and collective commitment to our common endeavour to fight the scourge of conflicts and instability in Africa and to promote peace and understanding on the Continent. Moreover, it is also a reflection of the results of the efforts we at the OAU have deployed at sensitizing our African constituency and the International Community at large, on the implications of conflicts, particularly, the devastation they have brought on our Continent and on our peoples. I therefore welcome you all most heartily at this Seminar which we consider as one of our major undertakings as far as the operationalization of the Mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution is concerned. You will understand therefore that our expectations are high that the present seminar, through your active and in-depth participation, will be a significant contribution to our efforts to realize the overall objectives of the Mechanism.

This seminar is taking place against the backdrop of very challenging and in some respect turbulent times for our continent. The scourge of conflicts and its dire consequences is a matter of painful knowledge for the people of this continent. The gruesome pictures of hundreds of thousands of our people in different parts of the continent who have become victims of conflicts, the tens of thousands more who have been maimed and incapacitated and the millions who have been forced to vote with their feet is a clear testimony to the devastation that conflicts have produced. We are particularly concerned at the effect of conflict on mothers and children, the innocent victims caught up in situations of conflicts. We are alarmed by the increasing number of child soldiers involved in conflicts and who have been deprived of the opportunity to live a normal life and prepare themselves for the future. Instead, they are put in a situation where fear and hatred is the order of the day. This traumatizing experience by the most vulnerable groups of our societies in conflict situations has a serious impact on the future of our continent.

At a time when the Organization of African Unity, supported by friends outside the continent and the international community at large, and in particular the United Nations, is making strenuous efforts to prevent conflicts and where they have occurred to put an end to them, the fact remains that the challenge confronting us is still daunting. We have only to look at the extremely worrying and disturbing situation in Burundi where

lives continue to be lost and where the ugly head of extremism is gradually but effectively holding hostage the process of peace and reconciliation. Then there is the situation in Somalia where the goal of peace and reconciliation continues to remain elusive; in Sierra Leone where the civil war has caused and is causing incredible devastation to the innocent people; in Liberia where, thanks to the tremendous efforts and sacrifice made by ECOWAS countries and the particularly outstanding contribution of ECOMOG, we are beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel but there are those who are still bent on frustrating these hopes. In all these areas the OAU has been deploying and continues to deploy efforts either directly or through supporting the sub-regional efforts. There are also other conflict situations where the OAU is involved. For example as I am addressing the seminar now, the OAU is currently organizing a conference in Antananarivo, Madagascar, aimed at bringing together the principal political actors in the Comoro Islands with a view to forging ahead towards the path of reconciliation, stability and democracy.

The challenge before the OAU is not only to address the current conflicts but also to do everything possible to contribute towards the prevention of potential conflicts. This challenge is all the more formidable as we are currently faced with the disturbing phenomenon of the resurgence of inter-states tension and possible conflict in Africa.

As part of its efforts to provide peace and understanding, our Organization has also been in the last few years particularly active in support of the democratization process in our continent. It is also in that context that we have taken sometimes public, sometimes through quiet and discreet action, but in both cases firm positions in support of the observance of human rights in our societies. We have done so not only guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which all our Member States adhere and by the OAU Convention on Human and People's Rights to which our Member States are signatory, but also in the spirit and letter of the OAU Declaration on Fundamental Changes taking place in the World and Africa's response.

Clearly, therefore, the OAU has been very active in an area which in the past was considered a no-go area. But clearly also, despite our efforts and successes here and there, the fact remains that there is a great hiatus between our efforts and the actual achievement in the area of conflict prevention, management and resolution. The fact that we have not always succeeded begs the question on what more can be done.

This particular seminar is taking place amidst this background. Evidently therefore, one of the foremost challenges facing the seminar is to see how it can make a contribution in a practical way towards the achievement of our main objectives.

In order to situate this Seminar within the context of our current preoccupations, I believe it is important to give you a brief background of the evolution that has taken place at the OAU since 1990, which for us marked a decisive turning point in the history of our Organization's handling of conflict situations in Africa. Indeed, 1990 was the year that I presented to the Twenty-sixth Ordinary Session of the OAU Heads of State and Government meeting here in this same Hall, a Report on the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World and its implications for Africa.

Following an in-depth discussion, our leaders adopted the landmark "**Declaration on the Political and Socio-Economic Situation in Africa and the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World**", in which they recommitted themselves to the further democratization of their societies and the consolidation of democratic institutions in Africa. Moreover, in that Declaration, the Heads of State and Government also stressed the need to address the scourge of conflicts in the Continent and committed themselves to take appropriate measures, to prevent further proliferation of conflicts on the Continent.

The Report and the qualitative debate it provoked among African leaders on the precarious socio-economic situation of our Continent, resulted in the clear affirmation that in order to bring about the process of socio-economic transformation and integration a conscious effort had to be

made by our governments to create a conducive atmosphere of peace and security, to promote popular participation in governance and development, to guarantee human rights and the observance of the rule of law as well as ensuring high standards of probity and accountability by those who have been entrusted with public office on behalf of the people..

Significantly, the important momentum of the 1990 Declaration inspired our leaders to contemplate on a new political approach into the ways Africa dealt with conflicts. It also brought about a herculean challenge and provided an important impetus to the need to reflect more concretely on how to inject new institutional dynamism in our efforts at addressing the scourge of conflicts in Africa. These reflections provided the basis for the Heads of State and Government of the OAU, meeting in Cairo, Egypt from 28 - 30 June 1993, to adopt the Cairo Declaration on the establishment, within the OAU, of the Mechanism for conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution.

As you will recall, that decision to establish the Mechanism, was motivated by among other things, the mounting expectations of our peoples and also of the International Community, to see a greater involvement by Africa in the search for durable solutions to the many problems that beset our Continent. Furthermore, the end of the cold war had introduced a new equation in international relations and diplomacy

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affecting the geo-strategic position of our Continent. At the same time, the attitude of the International Community towards conflicts in Africa also began to undergo profound changes, with increasing reluctance on its part to assume its responsibilities in resolving conflicts in Africa.

The objective of this seminar is to provide a forum for the exchange of information, views and ideas on the best ways and means of establishing an early warning system within the OAU. Indeed, the relevance of establishing such a system, as a process to facilitate the operationalization of our Mechanism cannot be overemphasized. Experience with that Mechanism for the last two years has clearly demonstrated the important role which speedy and early exchange of information on conflict situations in Africa can play. Moreover, the relevance of such a system also stems from the fact that effective conflict prevention action does presuppose the existence of an Early Warning System matched by an Early Political Action. In this regard, if the full potential of the conflict prevention and management capacity of the OAU Mechanism is to be fully realized, the Mechanism will no doubt need the backing of a continental wide Early warning Network. Such a Network of information should involve many actors at various levels of governments, institutions and the civil society, including the people at the grassroots level. Consequently, what is expected of this Seminar is to make concrete and result-oriented proposals on how the envisaged early warning system can be established within the OAU to provide the required capacity

for the timely collection, analysis and communication of relevant information. In our view, such an exercise would form the basis upon which estimates and conclusions would be made to enable policy-makers within the OAU take appropriate decisions based on clearly defined options.

But, such an early warning for enhancing the capacity of the OAU Mechanism must go beyond simply developing a network or building a data-base system for anticipating conflicts. What is also required, is the development of an efficient and cost-effective capacity at the OAU Headquarters linked to the OAU field Offices and Missions as well as the Regional Economic Groups (REGs) to facilitate data collection and analysis for consideration by the Central Organ and the Secretary General of the OAU.

I wish here to emphasize the importance of working closely with the United Nations. Indeed, it is evident that the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security lies with the United Nations. Therefore, whether a conflict occurs in Europe, in Asia, in Africa or else where, the United Nations has the same responsibility in addressing them. While we recognize the overall and main responsibility of the United Nations, we believe that Africa has also its role to play in the maintenance of peace and security in the region whether in support of the United Nations efforts or through its own initiatives. It is in that context that we, at the

OAU are convinced of the need to work closely with the United Nations and of the importance of putting in place a coordinating mechanism to enhance cooperation between the two Organizations in pursuance of our common goals.

In this respect, I wish to welcome the recent initiative of the United Nations Secretary General aimed at supporting Africa's efforts in conflict prevention, management and resolution. We believe that this initiative is an important step in our common endeavours to promote peace and security in the Continent. I wish therefore to reiterate OAU's disposition and commitment to work closely and coordinate its action with the United Nations.

I am convinced that a system of early warning with a strong analytical base is an essential element to enhance the efficiency of the Mechanism and thus enabling it to respond more effectively to its objectives. In this way, an early warning system within the OAU would enhance the capacity of the Organization in the promotion of peace, security, stability in the region through the anticipation and prevention of situations that are likely to disrupt regional harmony with serious impact on Africa's efforts towards development.

At this point, let me now turn to the main preoccupation of this Seminar, especially our perception of where we are today and how the participants to the Seminar, especially those of you who have been most active in the field can assist us in the realization of our objectives. I have already alluded to the point that the convening of this Seminar is directly linked to the main focus of the Mechanism on anticipation and prevention of conflicts. Indeed, preventive diplomacy as a strategic option in the OAU arose not only from the notion that prevention is always better than cure, but more importantly, it reflected the serious concern that we at the OAU have regarding the devastating impact of conflict on our people and our efforts towards socio-economic development.

I believe that it is appropriate to make it clear that the Early Warning System shall function under the exclusive control and responsibility of the OAU and its policy-making organ. Indeed, it shall be an instrument in the hand of the Organization and its Member States and shall operate in transparency.

I wish at this juncture, to draw your attention to the fact that in planning for and holding this Seminar, our objective has consistently remained the search for a practical and result-oriented interaction, which at the end of the day would provide practical solutions to our day-to-day practical problems.

There is however, the need to emphasize that the OAU does not have the resources to establish a big and complex early warning system. What we need is a small but effective system with regional and international coverage and capable of providing the necessary signals and trends on conflict situations before their occurrence and to provide the basis of an early political action.

Additionally, whatever framework or structure that will be recommended at the end of this brainstorming exercise, should be a tool to be used in the search for and interpretation of information necessary to make informed judgements about possible sequences of events and outcomes. To this end, I hope that in the course of the next few days, this distinguished gathering would focus on issues such as: what type of early warning is likely to realize the aspirations of the OAU, what methods of data collection and analysis are more appropriate to OAU, what should be the modalities for effective co-ordination, what would the OAU require to establish its own Networking and who should be linked to such early warning networks and finally, how can the OAU enhance its capacity in communication, information exchange as well as in promoting public awareness about the existence of the Mechanism within and outside Africa.

I believe that the Seminar would not meet our concerns and expectations, if at the end of the day, it does not lead to the formulation of a concrete Agenda for future action that will bring together all the interested actors including the Member States, the United Nations and its specialized Agencies the regional economic groupings in Africa, other concerned regional and sub-regional organizations including Non-Governmental Organizations as well as African Universities and research institutions.

Finally, I would like to express the continued appreciation of our Organization, first and foremost, to our Member States, who, even in the face of the monumental task of allocating scarce and limited resources between competing demands, continue to extend commendable moral and political support to the Organization's efforts to deal with conflicts. I should also like to acknowledge here, the kind generosity of our external friends, most particularly, the Government of the United States of America which continues to support our mechanism most enthusiastically, as evidenced by the allocation of financial resources which partially defrayed the cost of hosting this Seminar as well as other countries that are supporting our efforts towards enhancing the operational capacity of the Mechanism.

It is my fervent hope that the tremendous reservoir of goodwill and support inside and outside Africa for the OAU Mechanism, will be translated into concrete action of support and that other governments and institutions will find it worth to invest in peace on the Continent.

On its part, Africa has the will and the determination to pursue vigorously its efforts aimed at putting an end to the scourge of conflicts in Africa. In this regard, the establishment of an Early Warning System will be a milestone on our quest for peace, security and stability in Africa.