Organization of African Unity

ADDRESS BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU,
AT THE SENIOR LEVEL SYMPOSIUM - GOLDEN SPEAR 2000

MOUNT KENYA SAFARI CLUB
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SENIOR LEVEL SYMPOSIUM – GOLDEN SPEAR 2000
ADDRESS BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU

Your Excellency President Daniel Arap Moi

Distinguished Ministers and Senior Officials

The Commander in Chief of the United States Central Command

Chiefs of Defense Forces and other senior Commanders

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to congratulate the Government of Kenya and the Commander in Chief of the United States Central Command for hosting this senior level symposium - GOLDEN SPEAR 2000. I wish also to express appreciation to the organizers for associating the Organization of African Unity in this symposium. I am personally honored to deliver the keynote address at this occasion.

The support given to the symposium by His Excellency President Daniel Arap Moi is a reflection of the seriousness attached to the issue of humanitarian assistance by African leaders. I would like, in this regard, to pay particular tribute to the Government of Kenya for its contribution towards providing humanitarian assistance in many parts of this region. Despite its own multifaceted challenges, Kenya has remained in the

forefront in efforts aimed at alleviating the plight of victims of humanitarian crises. Indeed, Nairobi has served as a nucleus for a number of humanitarian operations.

The theme of the symposium is of great interest and significance to Africa, bearing in mind that ours is a Continent having the largest number of refugees and displaced persons and experiencing frequent occurrences of devastating natural disasters.

The relevance of the objective of this symposium is self-evident given the situation in the region. Clearly, however, the need to enhance international interoperability and formulation of strategic-level concepts to prevent or respond to humanitarian crises is of continental relevance. What is generally relevant to the eastern African region is, by and large, valid in other parts of the Continent. Consequently, in my address, while conscious of the specifics of the region, I will be making remarks relating to the overall situation in Africa.

Let me preface my address by stating the obvious, namely, that the magnitude and nature of humanitarian crises that Africa has experienced in its recent history calls for urgent measures to be taken in devising effective ways of dealing with the grave situation. The proliferation of man-made calamities, particularly those associated with incessant conflicts that have plagued our Continent in the past two decades, coupled with the recurrence of natural disasters such as severe drought and famine as well as floods, have triggered massive dislocation of communities, extreme suffering to victims, particularly the vulnerable groups, and large numbers of deaths. The development gains that have been achieved after a lot of effort and determination by our people have been eroded within very short periods of time.

The African situation with regard to humanitarian crises has been compounded by the proliferation of inter and intra-state conflicts in the Continent. The prevalence of protracted civil conflicts in a number of our countries has brought the frontiers of confrontation and engagement - in other words, war - closer to areas of civilian population. Furthermore, these conflicts are more extensive and, in some cases, of long duration. The consequence has been to generate large numbers of victims and also to limit the field of safety that populations could seek refuge at.

Similarly, a majority of conflicts occurring in the Continent are internal rebellions which involve, on the one hand, Government armed forces, and on the other hand, a group or groups of armed citizens of the same country. The rebel forces operate under a political authority which is a party to neither local nor international conventions. It tends, in this regard, not to conform and respect the existing rules of engagement, whose enforcement by the international community has proved to be complicated. We have witnessed the horrors perpetrated on the people of Sierra Leone, to name only a recent example. The most barbarous manifestation of such atrocity was nonetheless the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

The worst form of degeneration arising from the dominance of non-state parties is the situation in Somalia where there is a total collapse of institutions of government and where regimes of 'warlords' prevail. Factional violence that ensues there has made it extremely difficult to effectively protect victims of conflict, using the traditional approach. The multiplicity of belligerents and fragmentation of factions complicate the process of intervening in such situations.

In a well-meaning attempt to alleviate the suffering experienced by the victims of these conflicts, there has been a rapid increase of humanitarian agencies that are involved in providing different types of assistance. These institutions are performing a very important role, sometimes under difficult and risky conditions. It should be observed, however, that often times there has been little coordination among these agencies, a situation that has led to duplication of efforts and, at times, even creating unnecessary complications which compound the suffering of the victims.

The magnitude and character of humanitarian crises today in Africa pose new challenges in terms of intervention strategies. The experience in dealing with crisis situations, particularly those which are generated by conflicts, underscores the urgent need for re-examining the conventional approaches so as to respond effectively to the emerging changes.

In this respect, the scale and frequency of humanitarian crises have rendered the existing mechanisms to be inadequate in coping with the severe crises that have afflicted different parts of the Continent. The rapid manner in which the impact of any particular conflict spreads among the population and the intensity of disruption that occurs often times have led to large number of victims within very short spans. The traditional lead-time for agencies – most of which are based outside Africa – to prepare themselves and come to the rescue of victims is increasingly proving to be inadequate. A delay of even one month in addressing the humanitarian requirements in a conflict situation has often led to a disaster.

conflict situations tend to receive very feeble response. Even worse is what seems to be a manifest reluctance of some of our friends in the West to participate not only in protecting victims of conflicts in Africa, but even in assisting Africans taking the leadership in protecting victims of crises. Indeed, the recent hesitancy in deploying peace-keepers under the auspices of the United Nations and also in effecting peace enforcement in conflict situations is a matter of serious concern to us.

All these changes create new challenges for most humanitarian actors in terms of both concept and operations. The change in concept impacts on the application of humanitarian law to situations of conflict. The widespread contravention of international humanitarian laws further complicates the intervention process. Humanitarian agencies are compelled to be more circumspect in moving rapidly to conflict situations where the basic humanitarian conventions are not respected by the belligerents. Of late, there has been not only a high incidence of torture and killing of innocent civilians, but also the very personnel who provide humanitarian assistance have been kidnapped and even killed.

A related aspect of lack of abidance to basic principles of humanitarian laws is the tendency of politicizing humanitarian assistance. It has not been uncommon for assistance from some members of the international community to be directly or indirectly predicated upon conditionalities to the governments of the affected victims. Apart from the morality of using the suffering of a people as a means of pursuing particular political positions and interests, the negotiation of such conditionalities have caused delays to the delivery of assistance and, thus, contributing to further suffering and death of victims.

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The geography of recent conflicts that have triggered humanitarian crises in parts of the Continent has created a problem whose solution has not been so far adequate. Classical warfare, upon which humanitarian modality of humanitarian intervention is based, involved the confrontation and targeting of combat forces and military installations. However, in current conflicts, attacks tend to be indiscriminate and, in many cases, encompass total areas. Consequently, there is no space for humanitarian personnel to work conveniently and for civilians to seek refuge. One solution that is often adopted is the demarcation of "humanitarian corridors" which allow a safe passage of civilians and for the operations of humanitarian personnel. It is unfortunate that there have been incidences when these corridors have been abused.

Given the reality that the interplay and sometimes the competition between these forces could have an important impact on the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Africa, which, in turn, could affect the political, social, economic and environmental developments in the continent, I am inclined to agree with those who have called for more coordination and the elaboration of a more coherent and effective strategy for addressing the humanitarian tragedies that confront us in this part of the world. The humanitarian community and the wider international community need to review, as a matter of priority, how humanitarian assistance is provided and how we can collectively respond to put an end to the intolerable humanitarian disasters in Africa in general and, in particular, those that have affected the Region that is the focus of this symposium.

As Secretary-General of the premier African Continental Organization, I am only too acutely aware that, very often, the mandates,

priorities, personnel and other factors often impose limits and constraints on individual organizations. Indeed, the nature of organizations and the systems in which they function are important dimensions in the overall equation of forging an inter-connected system that will address the outstanding issues that militate against joint responses. I wish, in particular, to draw attention to one of those factors which call for urgent attention. Currently, the international community operates under the tenets of humanitarian assistance that were initially developed in Geneva and which were, in turn, based on a set of four key assumptions that:

- Non-combatants should be spared the effects of hostilities and that military formations should follow utilitarian considerations;

- Parties to a conflict should provide access to humanitarian actors;

- Humanitarian assistance should be neutral; and

- There would be protection mechanisms guaranteed by international law.

As we meet here today, it is quite doubtful that some of these assumptions are still valid. There is undoubtedly a wide gap between norms and practice. In the context of the current situations in Africa and elsewhere, civilians are increasingly targeted as in Burundi and Sierra Leone where the distinction between civilians and combatants is blurred. Indeed, experience in these two conflict situations, and more particularly in Sierra Leone, have demonstrated that civilians including women and children, and, most despicable and outrageous of all, in some cases, even babies have been deliberately targeted.

more democratic governments are emerging in Africa. In many instances, we are beginning to see, on the African political landscape, leaders who advocate greater respect of human rights and good governance.

I have witnessed some of the terrible things that have happened or situations that have gone horribly wrong in our Continent. But in the period of the last few years, I have been more fortunate to witness the emergence and actions of leaders and governments in Africa who are beginning to address the domestic problems of state experiencing instability and conflict. In short, the old norms are at last giving way to a new political consensus, in which African leaders have assumed their responsibilities and taken the lead in providing solutions to African problems.

I believe that for these efforts to endure, the larger international community must assume its own responsibility. Rather than disengage, our partners should engage the continent in a true spirit of partnership and solidarity. This is why I had to come here personally to respond to the kind invitation of the Commander in Chief of the United States Central Command and to use the occasion to express my appreciation to the Governments of Kenya and the United States for this timely initiative.

I am reminded today of the recent past when the US European Command started to cooperate with the OAU Centre for Conflict Management to build capacity for Early Warning and Conflict Prevention. If we were to tie in the outcome of this symposium with the continued efforts aimed at enhancing the OAU's Mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution, the strengthening of related mechanisms at sub-regional level and the African Crisis Response Initiative, we would have succeeded in making a significant head way for having a blueprint

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for addressing the humanitarian crises in Africa in a holistic and more comprehensive manner.

I want to leave this symposium with my personal hopes and expectations that we can approach this problem as a collaborative venture, with shared responsibilities or what in current parlance, has come to be referred to as burden sharing. I wish to assure you that a revitalized Organization of African Unity will be better positioned and poised to work with partners in the Region, to carry forward the initiative which is being launched here today.

I wish you all very fruitful deliberations and look forward with great expectations to the conclusions of this symposium.