

**Message of Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity
on the International Day on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination**

21 March 2001

Today, as we mark the International Day on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, we celebrate renewed efforts towards the protection of fundamental human and peoples rights and the prevention of violation of such rights, including discrimination on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity, gender, and religion. Indeed, no other people have suffered so much from discrimination, racism and xenophobia than the African peoples.

Steady progress towards the elimination of these vices has been achieved during the last four decades. Efforts have been made towards increasing awareness and improving institutional structures to eliminate the scourges of prejudice and discrimination. Nevertheless, far more remains to be done because even at this threshold of the new century and millennium, many of our people are still falling victims to different forms of discrimination and intolerance. Sometimes even the traditional compassion extended to refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers and foreigners has been severely eroded and substituted by hostility and xenophobia.

There is also another disturbing trend emerging on the Continent. Cases of religious and ethnic intolerance are of particular concern. We have observed, recently, the occurrence of acute forms of conflicts caused by religious, ethnic or regional differences. Isolated as they are, these need to be contained and overcome. The trauma of genocide is still fresh on our minds, illustrating the terrible human cost that the ruthless exploitation of ethnic prejudice can bring to pass. We all have a responsibility to develop a culture of peace and tolerance and to uplift

the integrity of the human person. We need to continue to cultivate a society where there is zero tolerance towards any form of discrimination.

The Organization of African Unity has long recognized that the fundamental key to prevention of conflicts is the nurturing of a culture of peace and tolerance. Such a culture must embrace key elements of good governance practices including the respect of human rights and the rule of law. Indeed the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights reflects the principles of international human rights conventions embodying the elements of good governance, transparency and respect for human rights.

Over the past two decades there has been a genuine attempt among African countries to develop institutions that promote democratic governance and the rule of law. Further, the establishment of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution focuses on the anticipation and prevention of conflicts. In this fashion, the OAU has been able to make meaningful interventions in reducing tensions and conflicts. Similarly, OAU activities within the International Decade on Education and International Decade on Women, have also expanded thinking that the expression of liberty and right to non-discrimination are indeed fundamental principles towards inculcating and consolidating the culture of tolerance.

I am confident that the World Conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance will identify global solutions to be implemented to reduce the overall problem of racial and ethnic prejudice. The fact that the Conference will be held in South Africa, later this year, is of great significance. Indeed, the South African experience offers lessons on tolerance and reconciliation that the rest of the world can aspire to.

The OAU and its Member States are fully supportive of the Conference. I do hope that the follow-up mechanism that may be established after the Conference, will look into issues of preventive education, legal reform and advocacy strategies for combating racism and all forms of discrimination. It is my hope and belief that we shall all work and strive together to eliminate this scourge.

Addis Ababa, 21 March 2001