

“Towards the African Union: Prospects and Challenges”
Statement by
Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the OAU,
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The Executive Director of the Institute for Security Studies, Dr. Jakkie Cilliers,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure for me to be back at the Institute for Security Studies, particularly on this auspicious occasion when the Institute is celebrating its 10th anniversary. I wish to pay tribute to the Executive Director and the staff of the ISS for the outstanding achievements this institution has made during the decade of its existence. Not only has it been able to expand its programmes and the scope of its outreach and to improve the quality of its output, but it has also has strived to become truly Continental. The ISS is now one of the prominent institutions that governments, the media, and even universities recognize. I wish to congratulate the leadership and the ISS staff for this accomplishment.

I have been asked to discuss the progress towards the African Union, and the prospects and challenges associated with this endeavour. Perhaps, I should start by thanking the ISS for giving me this opportunity as Secretary General of our Continental Organization to share with you some reflections on this issue which is of critical importance in the agenda of Africa's development as we enter the new millennium. The issue of establishing the African Union preoccupies the thinking of African leaders today and, certainly, it is an issue of central importance among the activities of the Organization of African Unity.

Right at the dawn of independence it was realized that Africa's salvation and prosperity lies in the unity of her people and societies. Indeed, it was principally due to unity that we were able to win political independence for the whole Continent and to bring to an end the system of apartheid in South Africa. It enabled the African people to overcome the constraints emanating from the prevailing poverty and the underdeveloped nature of basic infrastructure. Indeed, unity remained a shared organizing principle among the diversity of leaders and governments during the past four decades. Whether civilian or military, republic or monarchical, democratic or autocratic, none of them, at any point expressed reservation or divergence on the principle of Continental cooperation and integration. All of them, without exception have demonstrated increased determination and vociferous public declarations on the issue of regional cooperation and integration even before the subject has gained currency in the global development discourse.

As you all may know, the commitment to unity and integration was not simply a rhetorical disposition on the part of the African leadership and the people. Indeed, the very creation of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 and the determination to maintain and consolidate its activities, is a clear demonstration of the resolve to realize, in a concrete way, that faith in unity. You may also be familiar with the profound exchanges among the leaders on the strategic approach to realizing this vision. There were leaders and their nations who were even prepared to postpone their independence if it could facilitate the forging of closer integration with their neighbours.

Much of the first two decades of independence were devoted to the process of nation building and institutional development and, more prominently, to the fight against colonialism and apartheid. By the 1980s the challenge of addressing the issue of Continental socio-economic transformation was becoming more urgent. This was reinforced by the economic decline experienced from the late 1970s and the realization of the non-viability of externally dependent strategies of development. It is within this context that African leaders enunciated the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 that elaborated on a path for economic integration in the Continent by using Regional Economic Communities as the building blocs. This overall framework was subsequently embedded into the Abuja Treaty on the establishment of the African Economic Community that was signed in June 1991.

African States have adopted the Abuja Treaty and the Treaties of the Regional Economic Communities, as blueprints for achieving sustainable and rapid development through regional integration. In doing so, we have come to realize that economic power of nations has become by far the most dominant factor in the relevance and importance of countries in the emerging global order. This is why even the major world powers are continuously striving to widen and strengthen the base of their economic strength, through a conscious effort to expand their economic space and market size.

In the case of Africa, a continent which has been marginalized for too long a time in the world economy, integration is no longer a matter of convenience, but an indispensable strategy for survival and development. The pace of globalization, coupled with the sweeping wave of economic liberalization, and with the imbalances in the distribution of the benefits in favour of the strong economies, has increased the urgency for all our countries to join hands to expand, fortify, solidify and integrate their economic space, to serve as a platform for take off and effective integration into the global economy. Regional integration therefore at the very least constitutes Africa's response to globalization, and an instrument to reverse the trend towards marginalization of the continent.

It cannot be disputed that some advances have been made in the quest to foster closer integration in the Continent. However, as we approached the end of the 1990s, the obstacles confronting our endeavour were quite immense. Our Continent was being threatened increasingly into marginalization by its failure to cope with the demands of globalization. It was becoming evident that even stronger economies, with their advanced technological base, were finding it necessary to consolidate their level of economic integration as a means of gaining from the opportunities of this historic phenomenon.

Within the Continent, the people of Africa were confronted with multiple setbacks of incessant conflicts with the attendant consequence of deaths, disruption, security, instability, and considerable destruction; they were also suffering from the trauma of the HIV-AIDS pandemic and other killer diseases, and experiencing frequent natural disasters.

We have realized that the magnitude of the external and internal challenges could be handled only by consolidating our unity. The status quo and the nascent structures of integration could not sustain the impending threat. Thus, on 9.9.1999, the 4th Extraordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU meeting was convened in Sirte, in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. The Sirte Declaration was proclaimed. Through this historic commitment, Africa's leaders agreed to establish an African Union, in conformity with the ultimate objectives of the Charter of the OAU and the provisions of the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community. In addition, the Heads of State and Government decided to accelerate the process of implementing the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, through the shortening of the implementation periods, establishing of all the institutions provided for the Abuja Treaty, including the creation of the Pan-African Parliament.

In Lome, Togo, on 11th July, the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government adopted the Constitutive Act of the African Union. As of today, 30 Member States have signed the Act and by the end of December I expect several more to have also signed. The Lome Summit also took a decision on the convening of a Meeting of African Parliamentarians in order to consider the Protocol on the establishment of the Pan-African Parliament. That meeting is scheduled for start tomorrow, here in Pretoria.

The African Union, is first and foremost, an expression of a determination to elevate the framework of Continental integration. The agreement that was reached in Sirte and later Lome, after a frank and rigorous exchange of views among our leaders demonstrated a desire to come up with an even stronger instrument that can enable our people and Government overcome the challenges confronting them.

The African Union is structured to overcome the institutional limitation of the OAU as it has historically evolved with a stronger orientation to pursuing the political agenda, and the African Economic Community with a stronger disposition to the economic agenda. By fusing and streamlining the two institutions and in the process developing a coherently integrated agenda, the African Union becomes a stronger body.

The strength of the African Union is enhanced by its institutional structure which endows it with a number statutory bodies for policy making, consultations and operations that are built into it. In addition to the Assembly and Executive Council, it will have: a Pan-African Parliament; a Court of Justice; a Commission (replacing the Secretariat); a Permanent Representatives Committee; Specialized Technical Committees; an Economic, Social and Cultural Council; and Financial Institutions.

Several issues come to mind in assessing the prospects for achieving the objectives of the African Union. In the first place, and as I have stated earlier, African countries simply do not have a choice within the existing global system except to come together. The artificially balkanized nations that we have are not viable entities in today's world, economically and even politically. As separate entities, their market potential is limited, their productive capacity is constrained and they are inflicted with numerous political stresses. The only alternative is to cooperate and integrate.

The integration option is reinforced by the fact that it is currently in the global agenda. The consolidation of such institutions as the European Union, the North Atlantic Free Trade Area (NAFTA), or the Atlantic and South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), to name only a few, is a demonstration of the recognition by even the most powerful countries that the challenges of globalization can be overcome only by working closely together. The proliferation of giant mergers among international private companies further confirms the inevitability of this trend which Africa is not a position to avert.

Furthermore, there is a new global culture that fosters closer integration, particularly for weak economic and political systems such as those which exist in Africa. The phenomenon of globalization itself, which requires a high speed of performance, which operates across boundaries, and which has altered systems of production, distribution and consumption has instigated new roles and new capacities of the state. The existing formation of individual state structures in Africa cannot cope with the dynamic of globalization.

Liberalization and democratization are also part of this new global culture, which in the economic realm necessitate an increased opening up across boundaries. The obliteration of barriers of exchange and predominance of market forces promote economies of scale and encourage integration.

Similarly, the consolidation of democratic political systems fosters inclusiveness and even solidarity across boundaries.

The Continental experience of cooperation in various spheres also offers brighter prospects for closer integration. Contrary to some concerns, the quest for integration in Africa did not start last year. There is an experience of cooperative endeavours, both politically and economically that spans close to half a century. The OAU is more than 37 years today and its Member States have accumulated a lot of positive experience on unity and solidarity. There is also decades of experience with the Regional Economic Communities. Many of these are today exhibiting robustness and dynamism and have proved beyond doubt that they can viably serve as building blocs for Continental integration.

The most profound dimension in the prospects for Continental integration is that the role of the people is given due attention in establishing the African Union. The Sirte Declaration unambiguously stipulates that "as we enter the 21st century, and cognizant of the challenges that will confront our continent and peoples, we emphasize the imperative need and a high sense of urgency to rekindle the aspirations of our peoples for stronger unity, solidarity and cohesion in a larger community of peoples transcending cultural, ideological, ethnic and national differences." To this end, the Declaration pronounces the intention of establishing a Pan-African Parliament "...to provide a common platform for our peoples and their grass-root organizations to be more involved in discussions and decision-making on the problems and challenges facing our continent." And, tomorrow, here in Pretoria, peoples' representatives from all over the Continent will be meeting to consider a Protocol for the establishment of the Pan-African Parliament. Thus, the involvement of the African people in this enterprise will engender a stronger dynamism in realizing the objectives. Indeed, this element, coupled with the fact African leaders has demonstrated a genuine commitment for realizing the vision of the Founding Fathers. Their frank and rigorous discussions in Sirte and Lome and the enthusiasm that is being exhibited in the signing the Constitutive Act are all indications of brighter prospects for Continental integration to be attained.

While the prospects for establishing the African Union may be appear obvious, it could be naïve to under-estimate the obstacles and enormous challenges that lie ahead. The most obvious, and often talked about, is the scourge of conflicts. This has been an *Achilles' heel* for our Continent. Conflicts bleed our people and traumatize our societies. They have resulted in considerable loss of life and untold suffering. They create bitterness and hatred among the people. They have forced the people to vote with their feet thus rendering them as refugees or internally displaced. They have generated the phenomenon of 'child soldiers' with its severe implications, not least of which is to deprive these children of their right to be children. In some cases it degenerates to the level of sectarianism and xenophobia whereby primordial

elements such as ethnicity, religion, region become a basis for hostility, or African people considered to be 'the others' are discriminated against and sometimes even assaulted.

Conflicts, in general, have undermined many of the achievements the Continent has made since independence, impaired the potential for growth and development, and undermine the opportunity for integration. Every effort has to be deployed in eradicating this scourge. At the same time, it has to be recognized that cooperation and integration is the most effective means of preventing, containing and resolving conflicts.

Another challenge that has to be surmounted relates to poverty and the weak economic base of our countries. Many of the initiatives are handicapped because of lack of resources and sufficient capacities. Often times we are constrained to overcome the initial costs of integration that would allow us to reap the long-term benefits. By remaining preoccupied with basic issues of subsistence we are disabled in terms of launching into innovative and advanced processes that could facilitate the integration processes. Thus, Africa's absorption of the new information and communication technology is poor, the infrastructure is lacking, productivity is low, and the productive base tends to be homogenous. All these, however, can be overcome, with determination and concerted efforts.

To some extent, it is the poverty factor that is sometimes taken advantage by the powerful actors in the global system to further fragment us and undermine the integration efforts. For example, it is not uncommon for our rich partners to promote trading arrangements that separate one region from the other. The fact that we desperately need the preferential treatment or the support from these partners sometimes compels us to succumb to such divisive measures.

There is also the challenge of sustaining the momentum of the integration process. The Sirte and Lome processes represent an opportunity in which positive forces for reinvigorating the historical desire for continental integration prevailed. The Sirte Declaration was essentially a compromise between those who felt the need to expedite the process and move towards fuller integration and those who were somewhat cautious and preferred to move more gradually. It is this compromise that needs to be sustained and takes us beyond the hurdles of initiation. In this respect, the Constitutive Act of the African Union is a reflection of that middle ground and the necessity to maintain the momentum. At the moment, it may not be the most perfect instrument, but it retains a usefulness in assisting the launching process. It still needs refinements and additions. And that is a challenge which will have to be overcome in the near future.

For the immediate course in Africa, we need to ensure that the signing and ratification prowess of the Constituent Act is expedited. At the same time, while the goal of Pan-Africanism has always inspired millions of our people both within the Continent and in the Diaspora, we have to sensitize them all generally on the implications and sacrifices entailed.

I remain confident that despite the daunting challenges and the various tasks that we have set for ourselves, we shall overcome. This is because our resolve remains firm and our determination to accomplish the tasks is strong.

I thank you all.