ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY

STATEMENT BY DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU ON THE OCCASION OF THE 34TH ORDINARY SESSION OF THE ASSEMBLY OF HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT

OUAGADOUGOU,
8 JUNE 1998.

Your Excellency, Robert Gabriel Mugabe
President of the Republic of Zimbabwe and
Chairman of the Thirty-Third Ordinary Session
of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government,

Your Excellency Blaise Compaoré
President of Faso

Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government,

Distinguished Guests,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you all to the 34th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity. I wish to thank, most sincerely, H.E. President Blaise Compaoré, the Government and People of Burkina Faso for the warm welcome and generous hospitality extended to us all, since our arrival in Ouagadougou. The commendable efforts the authorities of Burkina Faso have deployed in order to ensure the most conducive environment for the Summit merit our profound appreciation and gratitude.

I also wish to place on record my highest appreciation to President Robert Gabriel Mugabe for the able and wise leadership he has provided during his tenure as Chairman of the Organization. I thank him, in particular, for the support he has extended to the General Secretariat and to me personally. His support has been a great source of inspiration and encouragement to us.

This 34th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government is convening at a time when our Organization has just celebrated its 35th Anniversary. This is an occasion, therefore, to remember and salute the Founding Fathers of our Organization for their wisdom in providing the continent with such a unique framework for collective action. It is an occasion to pay tribute to them for their foresight in charting the way ahead, in unity and solidarity, for the African peoples. This is also an opportunity for us to reflect on and re-dedicate ourselves to the ideals and principles enshrined in the Charter of our Organization. These principles have, over the years, provided a sense of direction and purpose in the achievement of the legitimate aspirations of the African peoples for freedom, equality, justice and dignity.

We should equally pay homage to the African leaders and peoples for having sustained the flame of African unity over the last 35 years, despite the vicissitudes of history and the difficulties encountered. They have defended the dignity of the African and upheld and cherished the spirit of pan-africanism. As we look back, we should take stock of the journey we have covered together and draw lessons from our experience. In the process, we should be cognizant of the achievements and shortcomings. We must recognize that our continent has been able to register victories whenever we have acted together in unity and solidarity. The successful struggle of the African peoples against colonialism and apartheid was a clear testimony to the fact that whenever there was determination to act in unison, Africa surmounted its difficulties and made a difference.

We recall with pride how we celebrated the climax of the victory against apartheid and racial discrimination when President Mandela, a legend in his life time, was sworn in as President of the democratic, united, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa. I find it fitting to recall this event here, because we are particularly delighted to have President Mandela with us. This will be the last Summit he will be attending as Head of State of his country. In making this special recognition of the presence in our midst of this distinguished son of Africa who, through his tenacity, perseverance and exemplary leadership has inspired and continue to inspire millions all over the world, I do so not only to pay tribute to him but also to remind ourselves of the historic success scored as a result of our collective endeavour.

Today, as we are gathered here, we need to recommit ourselves to the ideals of Pan-Africanism which inspired the Founding Fathers of the Organization. Chief among these, was their common and strong determination to promote co-operation, understanding and peace among the African peoples.

The search for understanding and peace has, over the years, remained one of the major preoccupations of the continent and its Organization. We know how precious peace is for we are only too painfully aware of the agony, suffering and destruction that conflicts have imposed on our people. African peoples have been daily paying the heavy price of peace, and yet we do not see the end of the cycle of conflicts afflicting our continent. We all still have vivid memories of the graphic pictures of death and destruction in Liberia, Somalia and Sierra Leone. And who can forget the genocide in Rwanda.

In some parts of the continent where hostilities have ceased between the belligerents, we are faced with the painful realities of the difficulties and challenges of sustaining peace. Indeed, beyond the cessation of hostilities and the signing of peace agreements, there is the greater challenge of ensuring their effective and full implementation on the ground. There is also the challenge of consolidating and building peace after the conflict. Above all, when the sound of gunfire has ceased, there is the arduous task of reconstruction and rehabilitation of what has been destroyed and of ensuring the return to normalcy. But all these efforts will remain in vain if national reconciliation is not promoted to build confidence and trust between the former belligerents.

Throughout our experiences with conflict situations, we have realized that peace is fragile and needs to be constantly nurtured. Indeed, even in areas where we had thought that durable peace had been established at last, we were saddened by the sudden emergence of tension. The most recent and poignant case in point is the unfortunate dispute which erupted between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which besides being a shocking development, constitutes a major setback. Despite all efforts made to contain and defuse the dispute, the crisis has dramatically escalated in the course of the last few days. Everything should, therefore, be done to secure an immediate cessation of hostilities and a peaceful solution through the on-going facilitation efforts. I believe that the Summit will find the most appropriate way of contributing to ease the tension and promote a peaceful solution to the dispute. In this respect, the resolution adopted by the Council of Ministers calling on the two parties to put an end to hostilities and accept and implement the

recommendations of the facilitators, provide a basis for the way forward and they merit your urgent consideration.

The ongoing crisis in the Comorian Island of Anjouan also deserves our full attention as it challenges one of the cardinal principles of our continental Organization related to the unity and territorial integrity of Member States. The Organization has, therefore, a vested interest in encouraging a speedy and lasting solution to the crisis which, if left unresolved, would have far-reaching implications for unity, peace, security and stability not only of the Comoros but beyond.

Mr. Chairman,

Conflicts in Africa continue to inflict on our people immense suffering and destruction. They cause irreparable loss of lives, maiming and traumatizing generations of Africans and depriving them of normal life. They generate millions of refugees and displaced persons who, in turn, become often a source of misunderstanding and tension between neighbouring countries. They lead to the destruction of property and infrastructure, divert huge amounts of resources from economic development and seriously undermine efforts at socio-economic recovery. The actual social and economic costs of these destructions are yet to be assessed.

Our continent and its peoples who have had their own share of suffering and who live under severe socio-economic conditions can ill-

afford to continue on the destructive path of conflicts. Our people need and deserve peace more than anything else. This quest for peace must be the commitment of each and every African. It must be the motto which should mobilize and galvanize all the energies of our peoples. Indeed, the challenge of peace is so daunting that I submit that the African people should join their leaders and their continental Organization, in a continental-wide alliance for peace.

In dealing effectively with conflict situations on our continent, we must bear in mind the multi-faceted causes of these conflicts and of the need to devise and or strengthen the necessary mechanisms to deal with them. These conflicts are, among other things, the result of ethnic divisions and polarization, the non-respect for human rights and the unequitable distribution of resources which characterize many of our communities. Our leaders addressed these issues when they adopted the 1990 Declaration on the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World and Africa's Response.

It will be recalled that in that Declaration they pledged themselves to further democratization and greater respect for human rights. Our leaders have also adopted the necessary instruments to assist in the resolution of these challenges. Thus, we have the Central Organ of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, which needs to be enhanced with more support and resources. As regards the protection and promotion of human rights, we have the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which complements, from the African perspective, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose fiftieth anniversary we are celebrating this year.

It is imperative that we make use of these mechanisms and strengthen them, where necessary. It is in this context that I wish to bring to your attention the Protocol on the establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights which has been recommended to you by Council for adoption. It is my hope that this Session of the Assembly will mark the formal adoption and signature of this Protocol.

As we commemorate the 35th Anniversary of the Organization of African Unity, we should also look ahead and project in the future, the vision that the Founding Fathers had for the advancement of the African peoples in all spheres of human endeavour and for their contribution to the cause of human progress.

In a few years, humanity will usher into the new millennium. Other regions of the world are organizing themselves for this important rendez-vous. At the global level, the world is going through adjustments, especially in the area of trade and finance. At the same time, a new technological revolution is taking place, with a fast development of new technologies, particularly in communication and information sectors.

In sum, a new world is emerging based on greater competition among nations. Regional groupings are adapting themselves to cope with these new rules of the game and to get their share out of this competition.

Our continent which had made modest contribution in shaping this new international environment could find itself out of it, if it fails to adjust to the new realities. This is an issue which we clearly need to address.

It is a fact that individually, African states have little leverage in meeting the conditions required by this new environment. Our countries need to work together and join their efforts. They can do so within the framework of the African Economic Community which African leaders have decided to establish as a strategic option for the socio-economic recovery and development and the defence of the common and collective interests of Africa. In this endeavour, African states can rely on the resources and energies of the continent which are not negligible. But beyond these resources, the main asset of our continent, in its efforts at assuming its rightful role in the new global environment, lies in our people acting in unity and solidarity. This unity and solidarity which inspired the creation of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 should continue to guide our continent and its peoples.

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