

## **A statement by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, the Secretary General of the Organization at the opening of the African Development Forum**

### **The Challenge to Africa of the New Millennium: The Perspective of the OAU**

*ECA, Addis Ababa, 24 October 1999*

Your Excellency, Mr. Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia;

Madame Louise Fréchette, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General

Mr. K.Y. Amoako, United Nations Under-Secretary and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa

Mr. Omar Kabbaj, President, African Development Bank

Mr. Leonard Robinson, President and Chief Executive Office, The US National Summit on Africa Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to congratulate the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, Mr. K.Y. Amoako, for bringing into reality an idea which he shared with us during our last meeting of the Chief Executives of the ADB, ECA, and OAU, held in Ouagadougou, and which we undertook to collectively nurture. This initiative carries particular importance for, I believe that at this stage of the development of our Continent, it is critically important that we harness all our human, material, and institutional resources in order to equip ourselves for surmounting the socio-economic and political challenges in our Continent. This forum provides, therefore, an opportunity for sharing perspectives, refining our strategies, and situating the role of the various African institutions and partners, as well as other actors in efforts aimed at attaining the objectives of Africa's development.

I would like also to join the Executive Secretary of the ECA in extending a warm welcome to all the participants. I wish in particular to express my appreciation to the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ato Meles Zenawi for having found the time to attend this session thus, once more, demonstrating his commitment to the issues of concern to our Continent. The presence of many Ministers and other high officials and experts is also an indication of their collective interest and concern for the destiny of our Continent. It is fitting that we have in our midst the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations Madame Louise Fréchette, whom we warmly welcome, bearing in mind that the convening of this forum coincides with the United Nations Day.

I have been asked to address the Forum on the OAU perspective concerning the Challenges to Africa of the New Millennium, in order I believe, to provide with a wider perspective of the African situation as we debate the theme of the Challenge to Africa of globalization in the era

of the information age. I shall do so briefly.

As we prepare to enter the new century, and given the challenges and prospects that are concomitant with the drastically changed international situation, the imperative need for our Continent to reposition itself is self-evident. Such a repositioning, a priori, requires that we organize ourselves in such a way that we are able to confront the challenges, overcome the obstacles and make full use of the opportunities that lie ahead in the globalizing world.

African countries are fully aware of this challenge, and based on the experience of the past have made an unambiguous conclusion that it is vital for the continent to take responsibility for its own destiny. This assertion by Africa has been reflected in decisions taken by Heads of State at various Continental fora.

Together these decisions constitute a well defined agenda on the way forward. The agenda is multifaceted. On the political level, the stress is on the consolidation of the democratization processes now being carried in our countries and strengthening the respect for human rights as well as conflict prevention, management and resolution. On the economic field, the stress is on the laying down of a solid foundation for a dynamic, human-centered sustained development on the basis of social justice and collective self-reliance so as to achieve accelerated structural transformation of the economies and to achieve them in the context of economic cooperation and integration. On the social side the Agenda includes the overall improvement of the welfare of our people and promoting gender equality.

I could go on, on what has been agreed upon. But the point I am making is that Africa is not in short supply of a well-defined development agenda. What is however required as we enter the new millennium is the concrete implementation of this Agenda. And in doing so, we must also recognize the pitfalls and shortcomings that tend to undermine our declared intentions and commitments. As this millennium draws to a close, we must recognize the reality of bequeathing to future generations of Africans, a Continent that is free from legacies and antagonisms like slavery, colonialism, racial discrimination and apartheid and as well as the divisive politics of the cold war that had done so much damage to the political and economic well-being and direction of Africa. This is no mean achievement. Yet this situation together with the recent significant achievements in the Continent in the socio-economic and political fronts, run the risks of being eclipsed by other disturbing trends. The consequences of these negative developments, unless forcefully reversed, would be catastrophic for Africa's future. Our concerted efforts to avert the marginalization of Africa and its role in world politics, then, has to be re-examined in light of these realities.

At the economic level, the sad reality is that at present, the size of Africa's involvement in global trade is only 2%, reflecting the extent of its marginalization in on-going arrangements to reorder the world's economic arrangements. This is at a time when international support for Africa's developmental efforts has dropped precipitously, and destabilizing conflicts are raging

in some parts of the Continent.

Not surprisingly, Africa's resources, which could be used to ameliorate the tragic consequences of these unfortunate developments, remain underdeveloped and under-exploited because of the cycle of violence. Such violence regrettably, reinforces instability in many parts of our continent at a time that underdevelopment is still very much a sad reality on the continent. Poverty brings about instability and insecurity, which in turn breeds under-development. The reverse is also true. The reality, which we must accept and address, is that these issues are inter-linked and we must first find innovative and pragmatic ways of addressing them in a holistic manner.

Given these realities, what should our priorities be in the next Millennium? My own feeling is that we need as Africans, to forge a consensus about Africa's priority agenda of consolidating the inescapable programme of domestic reforms, both political and economic, as one way of improving the well-being of the African in the new Millennium. Undoubtedly, several and compelling trends are in evidence, and we have to make judicious choices in determining our priorities.

For example, the growing efforts towards democratization and good governance must continue to be linked with assuring sustainable economic development in many African countries. Good governance and democracy or the respect for human rights can not thrive on empty stomachs. In particular, democracy must deliver on bread and butter issues, otherwise, democratic transitions will be reversed and the continent will slide back into situations where the politics of poverty gives rise to the poverty of politics on the continent.

The focus of policy debates in many African countries is not about the need for reform, but rather about the consolidation of initiatives. The questions that are being asked increasingly relate to issues such as how deep and how broad, should the democratization process be? How transparent should the political process need to be in order to encourage the creation and consolidation of strong and independent institutions? What should the role of civil society be in such political arrangements?

Contrary to what many would have us and people around the world believe, I want to say without any fear of that the drive for economic and political liberalization in Africa, reflects and aspiration that is very indigenous, with inputs from diverse sources from within and outside the continent. But, regardless of its origins, good governance is today being linked with issues such as sustainable economic development and while such linkages may not necessarily be perfect guarantees for sustaining the transition to democracy and a culture of political tolerance, they nevertheless, are important thresholds in creating acceptable African norms and behavior.

Having traversed this Continent from the North to the South, from the East to the West,

having met with and listened to our leaders, having seen the great energies and dynamism of Africans at work at all levels, I am of the firm conviction that in order to build on the modest achievements of the recent past and reverse the unfortunate developments which portend a future of anarchy and instability it left unchecked, the way to go in the new millenium, is the way of further liberalization of the political and economic space in our States and the consolidation of the process of integration among our peoples and countries.

I believe that future efforts need to be invested in creating renewed interest in the regional economic and political structures. Indeed, the efforts in establishing the African Economic Community, while fostering regional economic cooperation, still have to overcome practical problems which have impeded progress as many of our leaders had eloquently, articulated when they met in their Fourth Extra Ordinary Session in Sirte, Libya and decided on 9 September 1999, to establish an African Union and expedite action on the implementation of the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community. As is well-known, that Decision was taken against the backdrop of the realization that despite concerted efforts, the problems of integrating African economies has been limited.

Beyond addressing the issues of regional economic integration to promote the well being of our peoples, we also need to focus more on institution building as an essential element in the process of fostering standard norms and regulating state behavior in the African international sub-system.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me underline the fact that as we enter the new millennium, Africa has a clear vision of its responsibilities, its predicament, and its development agenda. There is a firm commitment to promote cooperation and create the structures of integration in our continent. Africa has resolved to address the scourge of conflicts and to establish lasting peace, security and stability and to pursue the path of democratic governance in the same regard, Africa aspires to promote sustainable development and to ensure that the people are the focus of all endeavours.

For the OAU, therefore, the challenge to Africa, as we enter the new millennium, is to pursue the agenda it has set for itself. The responsibility of every African actor and institution is to promote the implementation of this agenda. And one would expect our partners to support and assist the continent in implementing its agenda and in achieving its objectives.

Of course, we do realize that for the Continental agenda to become operational, it is necessary to elaborate it into strategic plans and programmes, to deploy the requisite tools and resources, and to build the essential capacities of implementation. Through partnership and in forums such as this one, I believe that we can achieve these goals.

Similarly, our endeavour to address the scourge of conflicts requires not only the development of a capacity for intervening in conflict situations, but also developing tools that can assist in the actual prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts.

All such operational challenges will continue to preoccupy us as we implement the agenda. However, I do believe that through building an effective partnership among all the stakeholders, on the basis of shared vision and a commitment for change, we will be able to surmount these challenges and to develop a dynamic synergy for attaining our common goals.

This then brings me to conclude with a few comments on the specific theme of this inaugural forum. Indeed, in this era when information has become a crucial factor of development, all the endeavours that I have adumbrated cannot be achieved without putting in place an appropriate information system. The entire gamut of strategies, programmes, projects tools and mechanisms require a solid and reliable system of collating and transmitting data; developing, disseminating, and accessing knowledge; and enabling rapid communication.

It is therefore indispensable that at the national, regional and continental levels, we undertake, a careful analysis of the full implications of the new information and communication technologies, with particular emphasis on the requirements, from Africa's perspective, of deriving maximum benefits for the whole society.

Information is critical for increasing productivity and enhancing competitiveness. Indeed, the entire strategy of promoting African cooperation and integration will rely in no small measure to how we equip ourselves in dealing with the information challenge. Similarly, the effectiveness of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution depends on the availability of a reliable information capacity for anticipating and containing potential conflicts.

The challenge for Africa as we enter the new millennium is to equip ourselves with the necessary capacities so that we can pursue our development agenda with vitality. I wish to underscore, in this regard, the importance of acquiring the hardware for information technology that will increase productivity and increase effectiveness. At the same time, it is critically important that more attention should be given to enhancing indigenous skills and institutional capacities for internalizing, developing, and deploying the information technology.

In order to avoid the creation of technological enclaves within our economies and in our societies in general, pertinent attention has to be given to the implication of the information challenge in the educational sector and in our communication infrastructure. The rural dominance of the small scale non-formal operators in our economies require particular consideration in establishing an appropriate information for our continent.

In the final analysis, I do believe that the information challenge in the next millennium relates to the degree to which we can equip ourselves in order to deploy the tools of information for

advancing the socio-economic and political agenda of our Continent whose broad parameters have been clearly defined. It is my hope that this forum will be an occasion for a profound reflection on the information challenge as it relates to the implementation of Africa's agenda in the context of an increasingly globalizing and interdependent world.

I thank you.

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