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UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA



**OAU/UNHCR COMMEMORATIVE SYMPOSIUM ON
REFUGEES, AND PROBLEMS OF FORCED
POPULATION DISPLACEMENTS IN AFRICA**

Statement

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by

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**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
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Mr. Chairman,

Your Excellency, The Representative of the Transitional Government
of Ethiopia,

Your Excellency, Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary General of the
Organization of Africa Unity,

Your Excellency, Mr. Kamal Morjane, Representative of the High
Commissioner for the United Nations High Commissioner for
Refugees,

Honourable Ministers,

Honourable Ambassadors,

Representatives of International Organizations,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is both a pleasure and an honour for me to address this
"OAU/UNHCR Commemorative Symposium on Refugees and Problems of
Forced Population Displacements in Africa", which marks the twenty-
fifth year since the adoption of the 1969 OAU Convention Governing
the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problems in Africa and the
twentieth year since the Convention entered into force in 1974.

It is with a great sense of solemnity and responsibility that
I address this symposium convened not only to take stock of our
efforts over the last twenty five years to tackle the plight of
refugees, but also to pledge our renewed commitment to do so with
the utmost dedication and through the best collaborative measures
and strategies for intervention. Bringing together African policy
makers, representatives of intergovernmental, international and
non-governmental organizations, the UN system, as well as African
and non-African experts involved in humanitarian and human rights
issues in this forum should contribute to the achievement of these
objectives in the best of manners.

The anniversary takes place at a time when the issue of
refugees has remained as one of the most challenging concerns in
Africa. The horrendous effects of the recent conflict situations
in Africa, some of them unprecedented in the continents history,
have taken the challenge of peace to even more heights and have
exposed the enormity of the obligations and responsibilities that

face African countries and the international community in this regard. I would like on this occasion to express sincere appreciation to our sister organizations, the OAU and the UNHCR, for their tireless initiatives in grappling with the refugee problem.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The problems of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons are no doubt among the most challenging concerns of Africa. Indeed these are highly disconcerting tragedies - tragedies kindled by centuries-old ethnic and communal rivalry and discords that are resurfacing today with devastating and disheartening effects on the social fabric of our societies. Ethnic conflicts, Rwanda being among the latest and the most dramatic manifestations, are not only threatening to tear the nations apart, but are causing millions of deaths, injuries, disabilities and psychological distress, not to mention resulting that they left in their wake millions of refugees and displaced persons who have been rendered homeless and deprived of the very essence of a dignified life.

While many are of long date, often, these ethnic conflicts are primarily repercussions of the colonial legacy and the inherited state structure which arbitrarily apportioned segments of ethnic groups to different states, paying little regard to laying the foundations for national unity or for the integration of the various ethnic groups into a coherent whole. Post independence states, have, regrettably, conceived and addressed the ensuing conflicts often as security problems and as such handled through the heavy hand of militarism.

Gross disregard of minority rights and the failure of central authorities in many countries to promote a multi-ethnic cultural system harmonizing the diverse intra-ethnic make-up and dispositions is yet another factor contributing to the exacerbation of ethnic and social conflicts. As we have all witnessed, the end

result of state nationalism, promoted by any ruling group, is dissidence and rebellion by those whose culture and traditions are overlooked.

The causes of refugee flows and displaced populations reside not only in purely political dimensions, but also in economic and social injustice. Ineffectual and misguided development strategies and policies of growth pursued by many African countries have fuelled emotions and helped to further intensify these conflicts. The universal constraint on the availability of economic opportunity and the prevalent squalor in the distribution of income and wealth have logically aggravated the feeling of despondency and contributed to sowing the seeds of conflict and social disharmony.

Whatever the underpinnings of these conflicts, the stark facts are that nearly seven million of the estimated nineteen million refugees in the world are located in Africa. These are conservative estimates which do not reflect the extent of the displacement and migration in any given region. The point is that in many African countries, refugees are forced to settle on marginal, inadequately serviced sites, in many instances surviving in conditions of squalor often worse than the situations they fled from. This is, of course, because the marginal hinterlands of most states that confront refugees cannot be expected to be serviced even with the minimal of social infrastructure.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

To reverse the foregoing dismal scenario is therefore a matter of greatest urgency. Ad hoc, isolated and merely reactive responses and initiatives by individual countries to this threat can no longer be taken as sufficient. Carefully throughout, well-planned, and comprehensively conceived long-term development initiatives will have to be embarked upon and implemented at both the national and international levels. This demands collaboration

between all the international, governmental and particularly nongovernmental organizations.

This scourge will not be redressed unless the root causes of the problem, such as conflicts, famine and poverty are resolved and until preventive measures and mechanisms to promote peace, security, stability, human rights, equity and good governance have been put in place. Sustained efforts at the reduction of conflicts and the working out and vigorous implementation of initiatives for conflict prevention, handling and management are therefore the cornerstone for promoting economic growth which, in turn, cannot fail to be conducive to the attainment of sustainable peace in the world.

This will no doubt require considerable well-meaning and dedicated efforts at restoring peace and relaunching development. All have a duty to contribute - the governments as well as the effective forces in the civil society. It should involve the politicians, the opinions-makers, experts and even independent personalities. We should indeed explore all possible viable options and involve all possible partners in our quest for peace, stability and development. Lasting peace can only be anchored on opportunity, prosperity and equity.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This symposium, in addition to the various afore-mentioned issues, should also give attention to the following crucial considerations:

- (i) More attention must be paid to promoting comprehensive regional solutions to the refugee problem to ensure that the human and developmental needs of the refugees are met in the host countries, on the one hand, and also that the voluntary repatriation of the refugees and their reintegration in social and economic life are provided for on the other hand;

- (ii) Regional and sub-regional mechanisms for coordination between the host and home countries in the implementation of these aspects must be created and strengthened with the support and participation of the international community, including the United Nations System;
- iii) There is need to ensure cooperation between countries of origin and receiving countries with a view to ameliorating the problems that arise during migratory movements. The recognition and creation of conditions to ensure the fundamental human rights of the refugees to return to their own countries, or their right to development could be a definite aspect of this cooperation;
- (iv) There is need to establish appropriate governmental mechanisms to deal with refugees and returnees and suitable migrant policies that are fair and humane in order to allow for the quickest integration of migrant communities in the socio-economic life of the receiving nation;
- (v) There is also need for mechanisms for designing appropriate responses for preventing or obviating conflicts;
- (vi) We also need to take cognizance of the requirement that humanitarian assistance in favour of refugees must be coupled with long-term socio-economic development initiatives. Interlinkages between short-term emergency relief and long-term socio-economic development must cover the pre-, during and after repatriation phases. More importantly, the refugees, returnees or the displaced persons should not be seen as victims, but as highly worthy contributors to development; and,
- vii) The symposium could no doubt also need to focus attention on what needs to be done to develop cooperation between countries of origin and host countries by way of ensuring an adequate exchange of information. Questions relating to the unique

problems that refugee women and children, in particular, encounter in the course of migration and remigration – such as health, educational, psycho-social and cultural adaption requirements – are issues that require special attention.

Your Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

This symposium is of enormous significance as it facilitates the pooling together of knowledge, experiences and insights of a large number of policy-makers, representatives of the UN system, international organizations, NGOs, donors and experts from many countries on how to best tackle an explosive situation. It can help to give these and other principles practical expression, that would guide us to formulate correct policies and approaches to help provide a lasting solution to the problem – including instituting such measures that would facilitate a speedy reintegration of migrants – and alleviate the inevitable pain and human suffering that the experience invariably entails. On its part, UNECA stands ready to continue to collaborate with the OAU, UNHCR and other actors in the implementation of whatever recommendations that will emanate from this important meeting.

I wish you every success in your deliberations and thank you for your kind attention.