

The Challenges Facing Africa in the Coming Decades, Address By Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim

Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim

Ato Kifle Wodajo
Chairman of this function

Mr. K. Y. Amoako The Distinguished Executive Secretary of ECA

Excellencies, Heads of Diplomatic Missions

Distinguished Invited Guests

Dear Friends and Colleagues

I wish to thank the Chairman and Board members of the Inter-Africa Group, who on behalf of a network of African Civil Society Organizations, have organized this farewell dinner in my honour, on the occasion of the completion of my term of office as Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The symbolism of addressing a gathering of this nature has not been lost to me. This occasion tonight also affords me the opportunity to speak to friends in the African civil society networks, as the last major responsibility in my present capacity as OAU Secretary-General.

By some fortuitous circumstances, I have, over the years, worked very closely with many of those present here tonight and others who represent the Civil Society constituency across the continent. Indeed, I recall that when I intensified my efforts to get the Civil Society in Africa engaged in the work of OAU, it was the support and encouragement that I received from friends like Ato Kifle Wodajo and Abdul Mohammed that finally culminated in the convening of the first ever OAU-Civil Society Conference here in Addis Ababa last June. I remain excited over the prospects and the potentials that collaboration with the Civil Society in Africa holds for advancing the issues of peace and development on the continent.

I would like to pay particular tribute to the Civil Society in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people as a whole and, of course, to the Ethiopian Government for their continuing Pan-African disposition that has been demonstrated in hosting and facilitating the functioning of the two eminent institutions of our Continent, the OAU and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. For many of us, working in these institutions we have felt very much at home during the many years we have been working in Addis Ababa.

I would like, at this juncture, to recognize the presence in our midst of a very distinguished American, Senator George McGovern. I particularly appreciate his presence in our midst for it gives me another occasion to express our sense of outrage and grief to the criminal and cowardly terrorist attacks unleashed on his great country) on 11 September of this year. I want to express to Senator McGovern and, through him, to all our American friends that we are all pained by this unprecedented and vicious attack on the American people with tragic consequences of unprecedented proportions. This was not just an attack on the institutions and people in New York and Washington DC but, in many ways, it is an attack on our common humanity. We share the pain and grief of the American people, and we emphasize the need for the world at large to work collectively and in a coordinated manner so that all peoples, irrespective of their nationality , region, religion, and colour, are spared such monstrosities and evil acts.

Excellencies and dear friends, This evening, I have been asked to share with you my vision of the future of our Continent, on the eve of the completion of my tenure as the Secretary-General of our Continental Organization. Initially, I hesitated taking up this onerous task for two reasons. First, I did feel that such an undertaking, which, is almost valedictory in nature, is usually done at the end of a career, normally at retirement. In my case, however, I honestly feel that I am very far from that. In fact, I strongly feel that I am in the adolescence of my career for Africa. I should not, therefore, be so presumptuous as to deliver a valedictory address now.

My second hesitation arose from the task itself- "articulating my vision of the future of Africa". I did wonder, whether I could have a personal vision, which is different from that of the people of Africa, which is different from that which has been consistently articulated, first by the Founding Fathers of OAU, and subsequently by our present leaders; the latest being in Lusaka only two months ago. Am I expected to make a prophecy about the future of Africa by feigning clairvoyance or some claimed intelligent analysis of the outcome of its current projection? Or, should I simply state my wishes on what kind of Africa I would like to see evolving in the future?

In the end, I accepted to speak at this function, not because I have capitulated to retirement or that I discovered that I can make prophecies, but because I believe that it is important for all of us frequently to examine our positions, reflect on our past and the future, and to endeavour to make the appropriate strategic connections. Short of that we may lose our bearings, and run the risk of not knowing where we are; and we may lose our direction and fall into the danger of not knowing how to reach our destination. My understanding of this evening is that you have simply asked me to read the compass, our collective compass as Africans.

Thirty-eight years ago, to be exact, on 25 May 1963, here in Addis Ababa, about a kilometer from where we are sitting tonight, leaders of all independent African countries at that time signed the Charter creating a Pan-African Organization -the OAU. As other countries became independent they all joined the Organization to the

point now that all countries in our Continent, except one, are Members of this African institution.

The significance of the event of 25th May 1963, which, as it may be recalled, was a culmination of long and intense deliberations, lay not simply in creating a Pan-African Organization, which was in itself an important achievement. Even more profoundly, the significance was in the crystallization of the collective vision and aspirations of the African People. On that historic day, African leaders articulated through the OAU Charter not only a vision of the Africa that the people of this Continent desire to see evolving, but also the means by which that objective can be realized.

That moment was indeed a point of reckoning for our Continent. It demonstrated the resilience of our people -in that after centuries of subjugation, humiliation and of being divided through the twin historical evils of slavery and colonialism -they could still remain adamant in their quest for carving a destiny of unity and solidarity.

The conscience of Africa as manifested in the event of 25 May 1963, underlined the centrality of uniting the people of this Continent. It was a recognition of the fact that the imperative of building a strong, united Continent where the people shared a common African identity compelled us to avoid the inherited path of fragmentation and separation. In the words of the OAU Charter, there was "a common determination to promote understanding among our peoples and cooperation among our states in response to the aspirations for brotherhood and solidarity , in a larger unity transcending ethnic and national differences."

The birth of OAU also underlined the legitimate aspiration of African people to achieve freedom, equality ,justice and dignity .These central values, articulated in 1963, were not merely slogans deriving from an imitation of some western constitutions. Rather, these were the words of a people that have come out of centuries of struggle against foreign domination. And the fact that these values were being enshrined once again into the Charter of an institution of independent states was a reaffirmation of a Commitment to work even harder for the realization of these cardinal values in the post-independence period. The Charter was not merely a founding legal instrument for an Inter-Governmental Organization, but a living statement intended to encapsulate the idea of a united Africa people.

Indeed, one is struck when looking back 38 years ago, by the primacy given to the people, not only in their being the motive force but more crucially as the essence of development. It is the aspirations of the people that should dictate Africa's destiny, it is their linkage that should provide the power, it is for their benefit that resources need to be harnessed. It is not structures, it is not profit or surplus, but it is people who are central in realizing the future of our Continent.

Peace and security were considered to be essential preconditions for translating the determination of achieving unity and progress into a dynamic force. Peaceful

settlement of disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation or arbitration, and adherence to the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided a solid foundation for peaceful and positive cooperation among states. Underlying all these objectives was a realization of the need to ensure sustainable economic development through coordination and cooperation in the various sectors.

These essential components constitute the vision that inspired the founding of our Continental Organization. It is a vision, which though couched in the perspective of the realities of the early 1960s, contained a fundamental framework which has remained valid and relevant till today. Indeed it is this perception of Africa's future which provided an inspiration and the dynamism for mobilization leading, to the victory against colonial rule and the apartheid system and the restoration of the freedom and independence of the people of our Continent. .

At the beginning of the 1990s, the agenda for action in realizing our vision had to assume a new orientation. The end of the liberation struggle compelled us to direct all efforts at tackling the task of socio- economic development particularly in the aftermath of the devastating crisis of what has been described as the Lost Decade of the 1980s. Compounding that, was the imperative necessity to cope with the fundamental changes taking place in the world and the end of the Cold War, as well as the emergence of the process of globalization with its various opportunities and threats.

On 9 July 1990, almost a year after I had assumed office as the Secretary-General of our Continental Organization, presented to the 26th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, a comprehensive report on the **Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World and their Implications for Africa: Proposals for An African Response**. The report provided a review of the political and socio-economic situation in the Continent and also identified the main elements of change taking place globally. Africa's response, It was recommended is to urgently tackle the political agenda, particularly in the areas of conflict resolution, addressing the problem of refugees, and promoting human and people's rights as well as fostering democratic governance.

Africa's response also entailed strengthening the capacity of our Continental Organization so that it can become more responsive and cope effectively with the new agenda. Furthermore, the national economic reforms that were being initiated in our Member States had to be consolidated and the process of economic integration had to be given the highest priority, and that all sections of society, particularly women and youth had to be fully involved in the development process. It was emphasized that while it is essential to seek international support and solidarity in addressing problems in the Continent, the main responsibility and leadership role lay in the people of Africa themselves.

In deliberating this report, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government promulgated the 1990 Declaration on Fundamental Changes Taking place in the

World, which fully endorsed my recommendations, underscoring a commitment to defining a different era for the Continent and to have the people of this Continent take full responsibility in defining their destiny. This Declaration has constituted the main blueprint for the work of the Organization throughout the last decade of the 20th Century, a period that coincides with my three terms of office. Indeed, in all its details which take into account our Continent's realities in the 1990s, the Declaration remained consistent and essentially revitalizing the vision propounded by our Founding Fathers in 1963.

Today, 11 years later and only a few months after our entry into the new millennium and new century, we can look back and take pride in our achievements. We have overcome many constraints. Indeed, we are still faced with many challenges, but we also can take comfort in that we have made successes. We have seen the total eradication of colonialism as well as the elimination of the apartheid system and the emergence of a democratic, non-racial and united South Africa.

The signing of the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community a year after the promulgation of the 1990 Declaration was a further manifestation of the determination of African countries to advance our collective destiny, and a reaffirmation of a strong faith in each other. It marked a resolute effort aimed at consolidating our political unity by fostering closer economic cooperation and integration among the peoples of our Continent.

After years of being anguished and standing indicted by the horror of escalating conflicts in our Continent, Africa responded by collectively insisting that it is unacceptable, for us, to be perceived as a continent prone to endemic violence, and where peace, security, stability and development are but a distant possibility. The creation of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution by another solemn Declaration of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Cairo, in 1993, was thus an important achievement in our quest to ensure the well-being of our people. It is encouraging to observe that all the initiatives that are currently being undertaken to resolve conflicts in Africa are being led by Africans themselves. And as we enter the new century, despite various hurdles to be overcome, there are positive developments in many of these conflict areas which signal prospects for peace.

OAU has also seen the steady but definite contribution in the inculcation and strengthening of the culture of democracy and the respect of human rights. The rejection of unconstitutional changes of Government, the willingness of Member States to have their elections monitored, as well as the reproaches often made on violations of human rights are some of the gradual steps being taken to institutionalize these values.

We have been able to maintain, sustain and enhance the Organization's relevance continentally and internationally, including developing active and constructive

interaction with external partners as well as with regional and international institutions. Increasingly, our Member States in particular, and the people of our Continent in general, are according great importance and extending profound goodwill to our collective undertakings.

We have committed ourselves collectively in combating all forms of discrimination and removing barriers to women's empowerment. Various initiatives are now being undertaken both nationally and continentally to provide opportunities to African women as our most valuable resource and to ensure their effective participation in the developmental process.

We have also been able to break the silence and the denial among the leadership on the devastating HIV-AIDS pandemic. Our leaders and governments are now fully engaged in combating this disease which is wrecking havoc in our societies. Indeed, it is now realized that all the efforts being made in promoting development will be meaningless if the very people whom these efforts are intended to benefit are being decimated by this cruel disease.

Finally, the seriousness and determination demonstrated in establishing the African Union takes our Continent much closer to realizing the vision of the Founding Fathers. The unprecedented developments that have taken place since the promulgation of the Sirte Declaration of 9 September 1999 in terms of the rapidity of registering full consent to the union through signing and ratification of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, the new spirit articulated during the deliberations on the establishment of the Union, as well as the concrete identification of the steps needed to launch the Union, testified to the fact that Africa is now ready to enter into a new trajectory of united development.

I am convinced, therefore, that African people are very clear on the future they want. Indeed, the prospects for attaining this future are increasingly becoming brighter. Nevertheless, there are challenges to be overcome.

First and foremost is the need to realize that it is we, the African people ourselves, who can bring about the future that we desire. The international community can, and should, provide support through various means. However, the main responsibility of attaining our goals and objectives lies essentially on us as Africans including our leadership. The global scenario as it prevails today is such that every nation, including our rich friends of the West, gives priority to its own national and regional preoccupation. Therefore, Africa cannot expect her problems and concerns to be given priority by nations outside the continent.

Secondly, while significant progress has been attained in the efforts to resolve conflicts, our capacity to prevent violent conflicts in the Continent remains limited. Both the Member States and the Continental Organization have not developed the necessary institutional capacities to preempt conflicts from becoming violent and

destabilizing. In this regard, success in resolving the prevailing conflicts may not guarantee sustainable peace, security and stability in the continent. It is therefore essential to develop order to anticipate the eruption of violence and instability. But more fundamental is the need to promote political systems within our nations that can be robust enough to accommodate differences without, turning them into sources of antagonism and causes of confrontation.

Above all, we need to inculcate or strengthen the culture of peace, democracy and tolerance in our societies. We must do so by emphasizing the fact that in any society, people can disagree, and even do so vehemently, without being disagreeable.

Associated with the issue of conflict is the whole question of respect for human rights and ensuring 'good governance. On the issue of human rights, it is my conviction that Africans should be in the forefront of the struggle because no other community of nations can claim to have been more affected as a result of violations of human rights than Africa -starting from slavery, colonialism to apartheid. When our people fought for independence, the objective was not only for freedom but equally important it was to ensure that people regain their dignity as human being.

Indeed, there have been a lot of changes, in terms of according a greater respect for human rights in many areas of our societies. Nonetheless, we still have a long way to go. We need to build and strengthen institutions that underpin respect of human rights. The issue of human rights has to be our own agenda, in Africa, not something that is imposed from outside.

In the same regard, the Africa which can make a difference, the Africa which is vibrant, should be a priori the Africa where there is rule of law, where people can decide how they are governed, by whom and for how long. We should also strengthen appropriate institutions to achieve this objective.

Poverty remains the most recalcitrant challenge in our Continent that has impeded the realization of many other goals that we have strived to achieve. Pervasive poverty creates a lot of suffering to our people and undermines the efforts at bringing about sustainable development. It engenders indignities, fuels corruption and denial of justice to many, and even generates and compounds conflicts. For as long as the vicious circle of poverty continues it becomes difficult to realize our vision.

In our struggle against poverty , we must recognize certain realities. It is universally recognized that Africa is clearly one of the richest continents with tremendous resources in terms of agriculture, water resources, minerals, forestry, as well as fauna and floral reserves. Yet, it is also recognized that it is the continent with the poorest people. How do we, therefore, overcome such anomaly of having the richest continent with the poorest people? Indeed, it cannot be denied that there are deficiencies that are due to our own making; and there are others that are beyond our control. While we strive for a fairer international system and a more just economic order, while we

campaign for such measures as debt cancellation, we must also look inwards to see how resources are used to serve our people as a whole, rather than to serve individuals, through corruption and mismanagement

In this respect, the initiative currently being taken by our leaders in developing an African Common Initiative for Development that addresses the sectoral prerequisites for the progress and prosperity needs to be actively and effectively supported. Indeed, the deficiencies in systems of infrastructure in our Continent, low level of investments in the development of human capital, distortions in the institutional framework for economic management are some of the critical factors that have handicapped the harnessing of the rich resource potential in the continent, and also forestalled economic development in our societies.

Underlying the call for the Common Initiative, as it compliments the operationalization of the African Union, is a recognition that Africa's strength lies in working together, through cooperation and integration. In order to achieve this objective it is necessary to address the essential priorities and prerequisites for such an integration. Indeed, one of the priority areas is transport and communication, a sector whose importance was recognized by the Founding Fathers as early as 1963. Yet, today 38 years later, the situation leaves a lot to be desired. You all know how difficult it is to travel quickly from one African country to another. Indeed, often times, it is easier to pass through Europe in connecting between countries in our Continent. In the same regard, the power and capacity of the African civil society has not been fully harnessed. Indeed, this continent has a very rich civil society that is operative in all spheres of development. For a long time this sector of society was neglected and denied a space in political and economic governance, even though in many societies it was dominant in driving the people's social lives. Some studies that I have come across have estimated that even in terms of contribution to the Gross Domestic Product, when properly computed it will be found that this is a sector whose share should not be taken lightly. Therefore, the current resurgence that the civil society is experiencing by organizing itself, by building effective capacities, by forging networks and by modernizing its operations, should be supported and strengthened because it could constitute a key factor in the development of our Continent.

Finally, I should also mention in terms of the challenges of realizing the African vision, that much as we are beginning to open up and generally acknowledge the gravity of the HIV-AIDS pandemic as well as the urgency of taking drastic action, the devastation is still very much with us. The disease, just as it attacks the immune system of the human body, now it has reached a point that it is vigorously attacking the immune systems of our societies as a whole. Numbers of infected and dying are increasing, agonies are multiplying, and the trauma continues. Recent information indicates that it is now attacking vigorously our youths, the very essence of our future, the vision that we are aspiring for. During the Special African Summit on HIV-AIDS, Tuberculosis and other Infectious Diseases, earlier this year, it was emphasized that this is the key moment to take action. We have to work towards prevention and behaviour change,

ensure the provision of affordable drugs, and promote the search for a vaccine. Otherwise, the vision that we have been aspiring for will only be a mirage.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Thirty-eight years ago, the Founding Fathers of our Continental Organization articulated a vision of building a continent that is fully united and in which every person lives in freedom, equality, justice and dignity. It is a continent which is economically strong; maintaining a state of peace, stability and security; assuming its rightful place in global relations, and in which all the people exercise their inalienable right to control their destiny. At various junctures in the development of our Continent, African leaders have endeavoured to sharpen its focus and to adapt the strategies of its realization according to evolving material conditions. For the whole period of my public life, I have endeavoured to contribute towards its realization, and I will continue to strive towards its attainment. There are challenges ahead, in some cases formidable challenges, .but it is we, African peoples, who can surmount this challenges, particularly because there is no other option.

I thank you!