

**Statement by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the OAU,
at the African Summit on HIV-AIDS, Tuberculosis
and other Related Infectious Diseases**

Abuja, 26 April 2001

President Obasanjo,

OAU Current Chairman, President Eyadema,

Heads of State and Government,

President Clinton,

UN Secretary General Koffi Annan,

Honorable Ministers,

Heads of various Institutions and Organizations,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to join our host, President Olusegun Obasanjo, the Government and People of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in welcoming you all to this important African Summit. I wish to extend a particular welcome to the participants who have come from outside the Continent. A very special welcome goes to President Clinton. We recall vividly the role he has played during his Administration in fostering relations between Africa and the United States. We are appreciative of his sensitivity, interest and concern about our Continent and our People. We are therefore, delighted that he has responded positively to President Obasanjo's invitation to be with us.

I believe I am expressing the views and feelings of all here assembled in conveying our gratitude to President Obasanjo, the Government and People of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for the very cordial welcome and generous hospitality accorded to us all and for the excellent facilities that have been provided. Above all, we thank the Nigerian Head of State for his support and commitment in the convening of this Summit.

Chairperson

We are meeting here against the backdrop of certain grim realities.

Everyday, thousands of mothers and fathers have to hold their helpless infants and face the grief of losing a partner and a reality, often

unknown, of themselves facing an impending agonizing death, and living behind destitute orphans.

Millions of our unborn children are at this moment lying unprotected from HIV infection because mothers cannot be provided with the necessary drugs for prevention of transmission.

Increasingly our national economies continue to be undermined as they are stripped of the most productive people including: farmers, teachers, doctors, engineers and leaders whom we have invested our scarce resources to educate.

Within such a context, this summit in Abuja constitutes a pivotal moment in Africa's struggle against HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. It comes after a succession of important meetings held at the highest level in Africa addressing ways and means of confronting the HIV/AIDS pandemic, overcoming tuberculosis, rolling back malaria, and immunizing our children against diseases such as polio and measles.

Let this summit be an expression and a symbol of our commitment to our people. Let us reaffirm our collective will to overcome HIV/AIDS and other major infectious diseases. Let our international partners know that Africa is ready and willing to tackle this scourge with all our might and energy. There is no turning back. Nothing we do in our lifetime is now more important for the future generations of Africans than to throw everything we have into stopping the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

This summit must give a major boost to the African and global response to the health crisis in our continent. It must help galvanize all of us to take more concrete actions and achieve greater cooperation. It must crystallize a sense of tremendous purpose, setting high but achievable goals, and seeking to monitor our progress towards them. We must focus on outcomes: preventing transmission of HIV/AIDS, caring for those afflicted by AIDS and facilitating access to treatment.

Above all, Africa must put its hands where the heartbeat of the fight is, that is on youth and women. We must recognize that the way in which we have marginalized and discriminated against young people and women has left them vulnerable and powerless, and in turn this is a major factor in the rapid spread of this pandemic.

We believe that time has come for our Leaders to commit themselves afresh and take-up the responsibilities of leading and guiding their people in the battle against this devastating modern killer. We have gathered here today, in a spirit of solidarity and hope, to work out strategies for a collective response. We are going to reflect critically on the past, plan for a better attack, focus our energy and resources on

specific, clearly defined goals and emerge with a strong response to the pandemic.

Over the past few years, there has developed, progressively and substantively, the emergence of a shared concern, both in Africa and globally, on the nature of the threats posed by HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, and the actions that are necessary to overcome them. At Abuja this week we shall have to inject this concern with a new vigor. This Summit needs to respond to the growing impatience for action. Across the continent, people at all levels are demanding that programmes and policies be implemented immediately, without delay. The Consensus that came out of the African Development Forum organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, last year, is an eloquent testimony of the voices and commitments of a cross-section of our people on the urgency of action. At the same time, internationally, calls are being made for fostering a readiness to commit resources to combating HIV/AIDS, for lowering the cost of pharmaceutical products, and for entering a new partnership with Africa to provide basic health to all.

The landmark development in South Africa on clearing the way for accessing affordable medicine is not only welcomed, but also should serve as a point of departure towards the objective of providing affordable medicine. It is clear that Africa has to assume its own responsibilities. We need to reorient our budgetary plans and to make concrete commitments on increasing the resource allocation on combating this pandemic and other diseases. We need also to develop an appropriate infrastructure that will provide access to affordable medicine across our affected populations.

While Africa should play its part; should reorient its priorities in order to contribute to the battle against this pandemic, the fact remains that given the economic constraints including external indebtedness, our capacity remains limited. We certainly are not able to cope with the enormity of the crisis. Thus, the vital role of international support. Africa needs assistance, massive assistance, to supplement its own efforts. Billions of dollars are needed. We particularly need grants not loans, which will again result in new debts.

We have, therefore, not only reached an opportune moment, but actually, this is now the *key moment*. The time to act is now. This is the moment to translate the existing consensus and momentum into concrete commitments, to follow the declarations with action.

To plan the battle against these scourges, the mainstay of our effort must remain focused on **prevention**. This is where we can have the maximum impact in containing and rolling back the disease. Let us resolve to reduce **new infections occurring** each year especially on

children, youth and women. We need to equip them with the necessary **awareness**. Our priority should be to create **an environment** where vulnerable groups can be involved in health activities and be able to form **a social immune system, a social vaccine** against the virus through **behavior change**. Experience from a number of countries has taught us that change in behavior can reduce the rate of new infections and alter the course of the pandemic.

Mother-to-child transmission is particularly a heart-wrenching problem in Africa. It is tragic because we know how it can be prevented. We can prevent hundreds of thousands of new born African children coming into the world already infected with HIV. We must make a stop to this. It can be done.

We need to find ways of providing care and treatment to People Living With HIV/AIDS. People Living With HIV/AIDS need to be acknowledged, embraced and loved. Their rights must be respected in full. Whatever we have learned about human rights in recent decades, this is the test. Above all, deliberate and sustained efforts must be made to provide them with antiretroviral drugs.

We should endeavor to identify specific areas of priority with appropriate strategies and activities, set targets, objectives and goals which will allow us, with our own involvement; through mass mobilization of all actors of our Nations, and also those of the international arena, to win the battle.

It is important to underscore in this respect, that while remaining determined in promoting preventive measures, the issue of ensuring access to medicine and particularly affordable medicine is critical. Evidently, the enormity of this challenge calls for an extraordinary and unprecedented mobilization of resources to fight this pandemic. In all these efforts, the search for developing an appropriate vaccine needs to be encouraged. African researchers and their counterparts abroad should be supported.

We need to act decisively. In future years, people will look back at this moment in Africa's history and ask, what did the continent's leaders do? This is every single African's responsibility at all levels. Political commitment is no more a cliché; political commitment means fighting these diseases. This summit is an eloquent demonstration of Africa's commitment. But the real manifestation of this commitment will be the outcomes in the months and years ahead.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that Africa's challenges are monumental. We draw our hope from the proven strength of our people's capacity to endure and to prevail. We cannot fail our people, because they have never failed us in the past. We should rise up to the challenge.