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Organization of African Unity

Statement by H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,  
Secretary General of the OAU on the Occasion of  
the Meeting for Universal Adherence to the  
Principal International Human Rights Instruments

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

14 - 17 May 1996

**Mr. Co-Chairman,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

At the outset I would like to welcome you all to Addis Ababa, the Headquarters of the Organization of African Unity on the occasion of the regional meeting for universal adherence to the principal international human rights instruments.

The decision to convene this regional meeting, pursuant to the mandate given by the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights is opportune and, indeed, welcome especially at this time when the cause of human rights has gained more urgency and importance.

In that regard, I wish to acknowledge the important contribution made by the relevant organs of the United Nations specifically the United Nations Centre for Human Rights, as well as non-governmental organizations to the promotion and protection of human rights.

It is no exaggeration to state that the effectiveness and impact of efforts made to promote and protect human rights can be further enhanced when concerned officials of Member States finally understand and discharge their obligations under the international human rights instruments.

We at the Organization of African Unity firmly believe that the observance of human rights is an important component in our developmental efforts. The correlation between the observance of human rights and socio-economic development needs not to be over-emphasized. The yearning for fundamental human rights is inherent in every human being. Indeed, there cannot be socio-economic development in the absence of peace and security as there cannot be socio-economic development in the midst of massive violation of human rights. The strict observance of human rights creates an enabling environment that facilitates the creative energies of a people to be released for socio-economic development.

It is for these reasons that I regard today's meeting as an important event in our efforts at promoting the observance of human rights. Scrupulous observance of human rights can only be ensured by those who are already aware of human rights standards and their obligations under international human rights instruments. Thus, I see this seminar as not only affording an opportunity to create the necessary awareness about human rights but also as giving a strong impetus to the process of ratification of the International human rights instruments by African States.

**Mr. Co-Chairman,**  
**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As you are all aware, one of the problems we are facing in the efforts aimed at implementing the international instruments is the slow process in the ratification of treaties. I am quite familiar with this difficulty in my capacity as depositary to about 17 treaties concerning the Organization of African Unity. I wish however to point out the fact that, out of all these treaties, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which is of particular interest to all of us here, has received the highest number of ratifications, coming second only to the OAU Charter.

As of today, only three countries, are yet to ratify the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and it is our hope that they will do so soon.

I believe that the delay in ratifying human rights instruments may be attributable to the lack of capacity, especially qualified human rights expertise in African States. Furthermore, some aspects of non-observance of human rights could also be attributed to lack of resources. Indeed, you will agree with me that a policeman who has not been properly trained cannot be expected to be the most active agent for protecting human rights. Equally, the rights of suspects in remand as well as convicted prisoners

cannot be easily protected in overcrowded prisons and in situations where the basic needs in terms of facilities and infrastructures cannot be provided.

It also goes without saying that, the judge or Magistrate who is not aware of the existence of a particular human rights convention cannot be expected to be an effective guardian of its provisions.

**Mr. Co-Chairman,**  
**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I have always expressed my belief that Africa, which suffered so much humiliation from human rights violations ranging from slavery, colonialism, apartheid to racism should be at the forefront in defending human rights. I believe it is in our interest to do so.

Today, everywhere in the continent there is a yearning, a movement, a critical demand for change, for politics of inclusion, popular participation in the processes of governance, for mutual tolerance and respect of human rights. The demand for change has elicited different responses and approaches, but; on the whole, we observe a positive disposition towards meeting the demands of the people.

The policy organs of the Organization of African Unity have recognized and acknowledged this demand for change. In that regard, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government meeting in this very hall, in 1990, adopted a Declaration on the Political and Economic Situation in Africa and the Fundamental Changes taking place in the World.

In that declaration, the African leaders restated their belief that to facilitate the process of socio-economic transformation and integration , it was necessary to promote popular participation of our peoples in the processes of government and development. The Heads of State also recognized that a political environment which guarantees human rights and the observance of the rule of Law would assure high standards of probity and accountability particularly on the part of those who hold public office. They, therefore, recommitted themselves to further democratization of our societies and to the consolidation of democratic institutions within their countries. This was a turning point in the history of the Organization of African Unity as the Declaration set out new and far-reaching principles for peaceful change in the Continent.

Indeed, a few years later, in 1993, the Assembly adopted a declaration on the establishment within the OAU of a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. In deciding to establish such a Mechanism, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government wanted to provide the Continent with an instrument for peace. The Heads

of State and Government also decided to put the OAU at the centre of efforts aimed at preventing, managing and resolving conflicts in Africa. Above all, the establishment of the Mechanism was a clear demonstration of the new determination of the African peoples and their leaders to address the burning issue of conflicts and to restore and protect the sanctity of human life in our Continent.

Similarly, in line with the new dispensation, Member States have been consistently inviting the Organization, over the past few years, to observe elections. To date, the OAU has observed about 45 elections and referenda in Member States.

Through observing such elections, the OAU has been placed at the centre of the democratization process underway in the continent. I believe that the participation of the Organization in the monitoring and observation of elections has sown the seeds of peaceful democratic change that will bear the fruit of scrupulous observance of human rights.

But more specifically on human rights, let me say that in 1994 the Assembly of Heads of State and Government requested me to convene a government experts meeting to consider ways and means of strengthening the African Commission including the establishment of an African Court of Human Rights.

The experts meeting, was held in Cape Town - South Africa - in September 1995. The document which came out from the conference was sent to all Member States for comments and observations and the Secretariat is expected to present the outcome of this exercise to the forthcoming session of the Council of Ministers and the Assembly of Heads of State and Government scheduled for Yaounde, Cameroon in July, 1996.

**Mr. Co-Chairman,**  
**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

To be sustainable, the efforts deployed by various actors in our Continent in the area of human rights require the understanding and support of the international community. In this connection, I must acknowledge with appreciation the support that the United Nations Centre for Human Rights has extended and continues to extend to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The cause of promotion, protection and respect of human rights cannot be won if everyone acts individually. A creative partnership between concerned inter-governmental organizations, Member States, non-governmental organizations and individuals is a prerequisite for the establishment of an effective mechanism for promoting respect and protection of human rights. Let our present meeting be an added opportunity in our efforts at building that creative partnership.