

# **THE MWALIMU NYERERE FOUNDATION**



**ADDRESS**

**BY**

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**“THE CHALLENGE OF DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND  
REGIONAL COOPERATION IN EASTERN AFRICA”**

**AT THE  
GOLDEN SPEAR 2003 SYMPOSIUM**

28<sup>th</sup> July 2003  
Sheraton Addis Hotel  
Addis Ababa  
ETHIOPIA

**"THE CHALLENGE OF DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND REGIONAL  
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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM  
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**Chairperson**

**Distinguished participants**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

I would like to thank Dr. Nancy Walker, Director of the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, for once again inviting me to this high level symposium. I participated at a similar forum in Nanyuki, Kenya, three years ago and I do recall the important reflections and insights that were shared at that meeting. The fact that these series of seminars have continued, not only in the East African region but also in other regions of the Continent underscores their relevance to the Continent's development endeavours. Indeed, the presence of senior military and civilian leaders at this symposium bears further testimony to the importance attached by governments of the Region to the capacity building objective of this programme. Once again, I wish to pay tribute to the Government of the United States, Dr. Walker and her colleagues, as well as to the Governments of the Region for sustaining this important initiative.

I am also pleased to be in Addis Ababa, the capital of our Continental Organization. Every time I return to this historic city I feel like I am in a pilgrimage of rededication and commitment to the cause of African Unity and to the plight of the African people. I am pleased to note that your programme also includes an examination of regional cooperation and its implications to disaster management. This aspect is indeed timely, particularly now that the establishment of the key organs of the African Union has been finalized, and soon the newly appointed Members of the Commission will have to take up the task of defining the programmatic

work for the various portfolios. I do hope that in this exercise the issue of disaster management will be given its due attention.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, from the onset, it is worth reminding ourselves that, **disaster** and **complex emergencies** are all too often regarded as aberrant events divorced from "normal life". **Disasters** are complex natural or human caused events, occurring with or without warning, causing or threatening death, injury or disease, damage to property, infrastructure or environment which exceeds the ability of affected society to cope using only its own resources.

In mitigating the effects of disasters, it needs a well-focused **disaster management** system which encompass all aspects of planning for and administrative decisions responding to disasters. This should include pre- and post- disaster activities such as **mitigation** which involves actions taken to reduce the effects of a disaster, such as evacuation of people before the disaster strikes; **prevention** involving the outright avoidance of the adverse impact of natural hazards and related environmental and technical disasters. It also involves **good planning** for example taking a decision not to build houses in disaster prone areas such as volcanoes and flood riverbanks. More importantly, **preparedness** is a vital prerequisite which need to be addressed in advance to ensure effective response to the impact of disasters. These measures are designed to minimize loss of life and damage; **organize** the temporary removal of people and property from a threatened location, and **facilitate** timely and effective reser relief and rehabilitation.

Chairperson

Ladies and Gentlemen

In the period between the Nanyuki symposium, that I participated, and today, the East African region and its neighbourhood have experienced, and in some cases continue to face, a number of disaster situations. These include: severe drought and famine in areas of the Horn of Africa, destructive floods in Kenya, cyclones in Madagascar, catastrophic train collisions in Mozambique and Tanzania, a plane crash in the Sudan, another outrageous terrorist bombing in Kenya, as well as abduction of young girls and boys in Northern Uganda.

When we broaden the scope and consider the tragedies across the Continent, just during these three years, we can sadly recall the recent earthquake in Algeria, the threat of famine in Southern Africa, a volcanic



eruption in Goma, pipeline explosions in Nigeria, capsizing of a large ferry in Senegal, massacres in Bunia and Liberia, and the recalcitrant pandemics particularly that of the HIV-AIDS.

Three aspects are striking in this disturbing list. First, the incidence and magnitude of these disasters is astounding and devastating. Even if one reasons that the apparent increase of occurrence is mainly due to advances in communication, which tend to give a wider coverage of these events when they occur, the mere rate of frequency is just disturbing and underlines an urgency of seeking measures for immediate containment. Indeed, the significance of the frequency factor is compounded by the magnitude associated with these disasters, especially in terms of loss of lives, displacement of communities, and damage to property. Across the Continent thousands of lives have been lost, hundreds of thousands of people have been distressed and even displaced, and costly infrastructure and property have been destroyed. Every time a disaster strikes, it takes the Continent's progress many steps backwards.

The second striking aspect of disasters that have occurred in the region, and in the Continent as a whole, relates to the diversity of their causes. These have ranged from natural causes such as floods, drought, volcanoes, or earthquakes; to technological mishaps such as crashes and collisions; human deviance such as terrorist acts; conflict situations; and to general public health lapses. Such a diverse range of causative factors further compounds the challenge of developing strategies for coping with disasters and for building management capacities.

The third aspect I would like to highlight refers to the frequent recurrence of disasters, in some cases in a repetitive manner, and invariably the inability to ameliorate the impact of devastation. The fact that the respective causes have continued to trigger disasters in our societies reveals that our capacity to mitigate the deleterious effects is still very low. In the same regard, the increasing magnitude of devastation is a further indication of a low response capacity and poor damage control.

All these dimensions of a sad experience in East Africa and in the Continent as a whole not only underline the gravity of the problem, but they also show that disasters cannot be confined to space or season. While there are areas that are susceptible to floods, or earthquakes, or volcanic eruptions, it may not prudent to suggest that those are the only disaster prone areas, even if we refer to natural causes.

I do believe that it is the recognition of this daunting reality and its repercussions to the region that has inspired this symposium. Indeed, I did notice as I went through the programme of this meeting, that the participants will have an opportunity also to take stock of the various measures, initiatives and capacities that have been developed within our respective countries and across the region. I hope that the survey will reveal an encouraging situation and it will enable this symposium to propose effective strategies for overcoming this challenge.

I wish to reiterate, in this connection, that not only is our vulnerability to disaster increasing in frequency and magnitude, but also the speed and scale of response from outside tend to be agonizingly delayed and inadequate. It has almost become a rule that a disaster has to attain dramatic proportions, which attract media publicity, for appeals for assistance to be heeded. Even when that happens, it has not been uncommon for such tragedies to be exploited and used for advancing unrelated agenda. At the same time, one cannot fail to detect an element of fatigue among our partners in responding to Africa's frequent disaster appeals.

It is therefore important to move from the approach of responding to humanitarian crises, to what you intend to focus on at this symposium, which is, creating capacities for disaster management. In fact, I would propose, that you also look into the possibility of even transcending this level and explore the viability of building capabilities for disaster risk mitigation.

In my view, the difference between humanitarian response, disaster management, and risk mitigation is neither semantic nor academic. These three notions underline different emphases associated with Africa's experience in responding to disaster situations. Indeed, these notions encapsulate the basic assumptions that inform the coping strategies when disasters occur. It may be useful to reflect on them as we chart the way forward.

The underlying premises of the humanitarian response approach is that disasters are largely seen to be natural occurrences of which human agency is limited only to providing relief after the catastrophe. It is recognized that human beings cannot stop the eruption of a volcano, the occurrence of an earthquake, the flooding of a big river, or the onset of a



drought. In the same regard, with all human ingenuity, it is conceded that accidents involving human-made contraptions can occur and they cause devastating consequences. While preventive steps can be taken to avoid the occurrence of disasters caused by human actions, for those caused by natural factors major emphasis is given to establishing facilities and procedures for responding to the humanitarian crisis that may arise.

While response capacities for this have recently been augmented by initiatives to develop early warning capabilities, in most cases the approach has been reactive, relief oriented, and often times dependent on outside initiative and financial assistance. In many of our countries, the legislative and institutional infrastructure that have been established for this purpose is mostly oriented towards relief coordination. In this approach, and except for such initiatives as periodic removal of the population from flood plains, which are often the most fertile agricultural lands, the issue of disaster response is de-linked from the overall development agenda. Disaster response, in this respect, is viewed merely as an event, of dealing with an emergency, rather than a process driven outcome.

My understanding is that your symposium intends to move beyond the event-driven response mode, and to develop systemic capacities for dealing with this challenge. By dedicating this symposium to the broader notion of disaster management, I trust that you will endeavour to traverse the entire range of issues relating to disaster occurrence. These issues not only include preparedness, response and recovery, but also disaster prevention and mitigation.

A proper assessment is needed on the progress so far attained in putting in place mechanisms for enhancing disaster preparedness in terms of early warning and rapid response systems at the local, national and regional levels. The experience of relief operations needs to be related both to preparedness as well as to rapid recovery in terms of restoring living conditions and facilitating adjustments to future disaster risks.

More critically, disaster management has to address the prevention and mitigation dimensions, in terms of avoidance of the adverse impact of hazards, as well as limiting the impact of devastation. Definitely, taken in this perspective, the issue of disaster management can neither be sectoralized into a responsibility of a single agency or assigned to a particular level of government, nor can it be de-linked from the mainstream development agenda of a country or a region. In this respect,

it may be necessary for this seminar to re-examine not only the substance of development programmes and its implication for disaster management but also to interrogate the methodology of planning and programming, particularly in the area of impact and risk analysis.

The inclusion of prevention and mitigation as critical components of building capacities for disaster management emphasizes the need of building capacities for minimizing vulnerabilities and disaster risks and avoiding the adverse impact. This is a process-oriented task that is operationalized through policies, strategies and sectoral activities that are linked to the overall vision of sustainable development. Disaster management in this respect becomes a crosscutting and on-going exercise within the development process. It is embedded into the recurrent and capital programmes of communities, local authorities, national governments, and regional integration structures. It is included as a basic component of partnership arrangements. Disaster management ceases to be a reactive response, as it becomes a proactive engagement across the society.

It may useful in this regard to draw some lessons from the experience of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution of the OAU, and its recent enhancement into the Peace and Security Council of the African Union. The challenges of establishing early warning systems at the regional and Continental levels, as well as the experience of the past decade in responding to crisis situation can be illuminating in developing similar mechanisms and approaches relating to disasters. After all, some of the disaster situations in the Continent are generated by conflicts and that security from disasters is part and parcel of the fundamental human security. It may be necessary in this respect, to revisit your discussion of the Golden Spear 2000 in Nanyuki where the essence of national security was broached and the extent to which threats from human and natural disasters also constitute a breakdown of national security. Perhaps, such a line of thought, which advances the notion of national security beyond its preoccupation on the state, may provide new insights into the functioning of the security arrangements that this symposium may propose.

This brings me to the issue of regional cooperation and the implications of disaster management. The need for regional cooperation cannot be overstated both at the level of preparedness, mitigation and prevention as well as in terms of response and post-disaster reconstruction and recovery. Experience has demonstrated that it is neither desirable nor feasible for



any one African country to develop a full range of capacities for disaster management. In fact, right now very few, if any, African countries have the capacity to handle even the smallest level of a disaster effectively on its own. In many cases, and indeed very sadly, we have had to go through the harrowing experience of hearing the agonies of our loved ones lose their lives while we are watching them simply because we do not have wherewithal for rescuing them in time. It is therefore important to begin working on a comprehensive disaster management system at appropriate levels of regional integration.

The orientation that I hope this symposium will pursue in de-sectoralizing disaster management out of its humanitarian confinement should help in underscoring its priority importance in the overarching programmes of regional integration. This challenge is part and parcel of the programmatic work of regional integration and it should not be treated simply as an issue for putting in place standby facilities and the training specialized personnel, or mobilizing relief assistance. It is therefore important for your deliberations – in this particular case as they relate to the Eastern Africa region - not be divorced from the programmes and structures of the African Union as a whole, as well as those of IGAD, COMESA, SADC and the East African Community.

The experience of regional integration in our Continent has shown that the goodwill for collective action is often hampered by lack of capacity for meeting the resource obligations such commitments entail. It is therefore prudent on your part to avoid proposing the proliferation of new structures which will add to the existing institutional overheads for integration. Whatever strategies you may come up with should aim at building and consolidating what already exists on the ground.

More importantly, the revitalized spirit of African unity recognizes the fact that structures, facilities and systems are necessary for overcoming our challenges. Indeed, we cannot do without them. However, the important level for ensuring our security, including obviating the threats of disaster, is to anchor all our endeavours in the peoples of this Continent. Any strategy, specifically that which involves disaster management, which is not connected to the people's daily lives and which does not build on their capacity is an exercise in futility.

I wish to conclude by once again reiterating my appreciation to the African Centre for Strategic Studies for giving me this opportunity of sharing my



perspective on a subject that affects all of us. I wish you successful deliberations.

I thank you!