NIGERIA, AFRICA AND THE WORLD IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, OLUSEGUN OBASANJO, GCFR PRESIDENT, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA AT THE FIFTY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, NEW YORK THURSDAY, 23RD SEPTEMBER, 1999

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Mr President,

A little over two decades ago, I addressed this Assembly as Head of a military Government in Nigeria. On that occasion, the focus of my statement was the urgent need to terminate colonial rule in Namibia and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and dismantle the racist Apartheid South Africa. Today, it is a great source of joy for me and my delegation, that a distinguished son of Namibia is presiding over the affairs of the 54th session of the UN General Assembly. My delegation assures you of its full co-operation and unwavering support throughout your tenure.

May I also convey, through you, Mr President, our deep appreciation to your distinguished predecessor, His Excellency, Mr Didier Opertti of Uruguay, for the able and efficient manner with which he conducted the proceedings of the 53rd session.

Our appreciation also goes to the Secretary General, His Excellency, Mr Kofi Annan, for his visionary leadership and the invaluable work of the Secretariat under his stewardship.

Permit me also to warmly welcome, on behalf of my country and delegation, the Republic of Kiribati, the Republic of Nauru and the Kingdom of Tonga, who have just joined this family of Nations.

Mr President, I stand before this Assembly today very proud to be the leader of a Nigeria that has successfully managed the transition to democracy, after a decade and a half of military rule. I would like to seize this opportunity to express the profound appreciation of all Nigerians for the international support and encouragement, which combined so effectively with the relentless determination of Nigerians themselves to reconstruct and transform their country into a vibrant democracy.

Our Administration has raised the hopes of Nigerians, and their expectations are correspondingly high. We are well aware of the enormity of the challenges that we face. But we are fully resolved to tackle our numerous social, economic and political problems head on. And by the Grace of God, we will not fail.

Since assuming office some four months ago, our Administration has put in place an

institutional framework for the purpose of reconciling competing interests and groups in our society. Our democratic institutions are now operating effectively within the system of checks and balances enshrined in our Constitution. Furthermore, we have opted for a policy of inclusiveness in all our political appointments, with a cabinet, for instance, in which all registered political parties are represented, thus moving away from the divisive practice of "winner-takes-all".

Our Administration has initiated policies aimed at re-vitalising the economy in order to create an enabling environment for investment and economic growth. We have also put in place appropriate legal framework for the protection of foreign investments and repatriation of legitimate profits.

Other measures we have taken include :

(*i*) a vigorous anti-corruption campaign ;

(*ii*) the promotion of transparency and accountability in public life ;

(*iii*) the abolition of decrees and regulations which hindered the inflow of foreign investment ;

(*iv*) the generation of opportunities for employment and income savings for domestic investment ;

(*v*) the privatisation of key state enterprises such as electricity and telecommunications ;

(*vi*) legislation and measures to redress obvious cases of neglect and injustice done to ethnic minorities, particularly in the oil-producing areas of the Niger-Delta region, and to deal with the problems of the environment ;

(*vii*) investigation of past human rights violations with a view to promoting and protecting fundamental freedoms ;

(*viii*) strengthening the capacity of the law enforcement agencies to promote law and order as well as security, and to deal more effectively with the problem of drug trafficking.

Mr President, Africa is indeed proud and glad to see the end of this century coincide with the total elimination of colonialism and the twin menace of constitutionalised racism in the southern part of the continent. The United Nations deserves our warm commendation for the crucial role it has played in this process.

Let me also, Mr President, pay tribute to the thousands who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom so that those of us alive today can proudly say we have the destiny of the continent in our own hands. It is, however a destiny which poses monumental challenges in our effort to improve the quality of life on our continent. We must strive to alleviate the grinding poverty and material deprivation that has persistently remained a feature of our political freedom.

Africa and Globalisation

Mr President, as we approach the dawn of the new millennium, the defining feature of our increasingly interdependent world is accelerated globalisation and the liberalisation of production, trade, investment and finance.

But, for us in the developing world, the reality today is quite different. Globalisation, in its various manifestations, is already experiencing a troubled relationship with the imperatives of development.

Mr President, it is rather tragic that Africa, the least developed of all the regions and the least able to cope with external shocks, has borne the brunt of the adverse effects of globalisation of the world economy. There are grim statistics which indicate that the well-known marginalisation of the African continent has turned into de-linkage from the global scene :

(*i*) Since 1992, Africa's exports and imports as a share of world trade have declined from four per cent to two per cent.

(*ii*) Africa's development is presently strait-jacketed by a debt burden of around 300 billion US dollars.

(*iii*) The continent is experiencing import compression, weak productivity and low output. On the average, factories that are still operating, do so at less than 30 per cent of installed capacity.

(*iv*) Africa's share in total foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows to developing countries has dropped from eleven per cent in the late 1980's to less than five per cent in the second half of the 1990s and to a meagre 1.2 per cent of world FDI flows in 1997.

And may I point out, Mr President, that this trend has continued despite the efforts of African countries to implement far-reaching economic reforms and maintain macro-economic stability, particularly through the introduction of more open and business-friendly investment environment, and the provision of incentives to attract foreign investment.

In the quest for a better and fairer management of a globalised world economy, it is now incumbent on us to direct our searchlight on the unsatisfactory evolution of the multilateral trading system. In participating in the historic Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations that ushered in the new rules-based trading system, the developing world had hoped that the new trading regime would enhance their trading fortunes, facilitate their effective integration into the world economy, and arrest their marginalisation from the global trading system.

Unfortunately, however, the vast majority of developing countries, particularly in Africa, have so far been unable to reap the benefits arising from their membership of the

World Trade Organisation. Africa's trade prospects continue to be hampered by the non-implementation of the special and differential provisions that favour developing countries, and the increasingly protectionist measures that are being imposed against their export products. Besides, the paucity of technical and financial assistance that would have enabled the developing countries to take advantage of the limited market access opportunities that exist, continues to deepen Africa's marginalisation in the globalised world economy.

Debt Overhang

Mr President, without doubt, the biggest monetary and financial obstacle confronting developing countries is the chronic debt overhang. According to UN figures, the global debt of all developing countries stood at 567 billion US dollars in 1980, and 1.4 trillion US dollars in 1992. In that 12-year period, these countries made foreign debt payments totalling 1.6 trillion US dollars. Now, out of the 41 countries which the World Bank describes as Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), 33 are African countries, a group that, some believe, is richly deserving of their own special category, called Severely Indebted Low-Income Countries (SILICs).

Today, in sub-Saharan Africa, every man, woman and child owes 357 US dollars. This is a continent where millions live in abject poverty earning around 100 US dollars a year, or 27 cents a day. Some African countries now spend as much as four times on servicing debts as they do on education and health care. Some countries spend up to 40 per cent of their national budgets on debts servicing. Furthermore, it is reliably estimated that for every dollar given in official development aid, three US dollars go back to the rich countries in debt service payments.

Mr President, I make bold to assert that debt relief for developing countries is not a plea for charity, but an urgent matter of social and economic justice. It has to be redressed if there is to be peace and stability in the 21st century. Therefore we propose the following :

(*i*) Definitive debt cancellation, not just reduction or rescheduling of the debt service regime ;

(*ii*) Eligibility limited to unpayable debts which for Africa, means the bulk of the 300 billion US dollars current stock of debt ;

(*iii*) Debt remission that is not predicated on the institutionally harsh conditionalities of structural adjustment programmes ;

(*iv*) Recognition on both sides of the bargaining table that lenders and borrowers share joint responsibilities for debts incurred in circumstances that are morally questionable in the first place ;

(*v*) Debt cancellation that benefits ordinary people.

Mr President, Nigerians rightly expect democracy to yield perceptible dividends in their lives. Our Administration will, however, find the task of meeting this expectation virtually impossible without substantial reduction of our debt burden, especially as we call on the same citizens to make sacrifices implicit in the recent measures aimed at prudent management of our national economy.

I wish to invite the attention of this Assembly to the related issue of illegal capital flight from Africa. It is an open secret that much of Africa's wealth has been illegally siphoned out of the continent by corrupt regimes and unpatriotic individuals working in collaboration with foreign partners. Nigeria and many African countries would be able to pay off large portions of their debts if only they could recover some of the capital illegally stashed abroad. We thus believe that now is the time to collectively deal with this issue.

In this regard, Mr President, Nigeria calls for a concerted effort of the international community through an international convention for the repatriation to Africa and the developing world of all capital illegally transferred from these countries.

Such an international convention or agreement is legally feasible and morally sustainable. It will compel participating banks to disclose the source of the illegal accounts they hold, repatriate them to the countries of rightful ownership, and subject the guilty parties to the full weight of national and international law.

Mr President, it is with a heavy heart that I raise the issue of the HIV AIDS pandemic throughout Africa. Our continent is bearing the brunt of this terrible disease which now kills around two million Africans annually, thus officially overtaking malaria as Africa's number one primary health care problem. This situation is even more frightening in that it has now left six million children orphaned in eastern and southern part of Africa. In West Africa, the disease has been spreading just as rapidly. Unlike malaria which is location specific, HIV/AIDS knows neither climatic nor regional boundaries. Global co-operation is an imperative if we are to succeed in dealing with this scourge.

Conflict resolution and peace-keeping

Among the immediate challenges facing Nigeria and Africa toady, is resolving the many conflicts raging on the continent. Today, as many as 19 sub-Saharan countries are engaged in armed conflicts. The negative impact of these conflicts in human, social, economic and environmental destruction does not need to be described here.

Nigeria, and indeed the entire West African sub-region have devoted considerable human, material, political and diplomatic resources to the resolution of the crises in the sub-region, starting with Liberia and subsequently Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau.

Similarly efforts are being made in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Angola towards peaceful resolution of their conflicts.

Indeed, African leaders at the recent Summit of the Organisation of African Unity in Algiers, and at the urging of the Nigerian delegation, agreed to declare next year as the Year of Peace, Security and Stability in Africa. By this declaration, we have dedicated ourselves to making the year 2000 the year when Africans direct all their efforts into effectively eliminating armed conflicts on their continent. We hope to build on the fresh momentum for peace occasioned by the budding peace initiatives in Congo, Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Angola.

We are also agreed on the overriding need to uphold codes of decency, ethics and minimum standards of decorum among African Governments and their leaderships. Gone are the days when the OAU turned a blind eye to the excesses and abuses of power by member-governments. Forceful and undemocratic changes of governments will no longer be overlooked or tolerated. We intend to condemn in absolute terms all violations of these codes, and ostracise their perpetrators. It is our duty and moral responsibility to treat our citizens decently and humanely.

Mr President, My country has always believed that the threat to international peace and security from any corner of the globe should be considered a threat to the peace and security of the world as a whole. While the maintenance of international peace and security remains the primary responsibility of the Security Council, the Charter provision for the complementary role of regional and sub-regional groups has also proved to be critical to the maintenance of peace at the regional and global levels. The establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) is a clear testimony of our commitment to sub-regional peace. As the records show, ECOMOG succeeded in putting an end to the Liberian war in 1997, re-instating the democratically elected President of Sierra Leone in 1998, and also bringing about the current peace agreement for Sierra Leone signed in Lome, Togo in July 1999. The time has come however for the Security Council to assume its full responsibility, specifically in Sierra Leone and other flash points of conflicts in Africa. For too long, the burden of preserving international peace and security in West Africa has been left almost entirely to a few States in our sub-region. The non-implementation of the peace agreement and Nigeria's continual burden in Sierra Leone is unacceptably draining Nigeria financially. For our economy to take off, this bleeding has to stop. The United Nations needs to do more in providing logistics and financial support to assist regional peace-keeping and peace-building efforts as well as enhancing the welfare of refugees world-wide without discrimination.

Reform of the Security Council

Mr President, My delegation believes that it has never been the purpose of the

United Nations Organisation to prescribe Democracy and Change for its members and yet make little or no progress in the democratization of its own organs such as the Security Council. My delegation accordingly urges the General Assembly, during this Session, to conclude deliberations and reach agreement on the modalities for the reform and expansion of the Security Council so that the Millennium Assembly will adopt them next year and not later.

How can the United Nations continue to perpetuate and justify a situation whereby Africa is the only continent without a permanent seat in the Security Council ? In order to promote reform and democratization of the Security Council, Africa, with 53 Member states, should be allocated at least two permanent seats, commensurate not only with the continent's size and population, but with its track record also of contributing to the maintenance of international peace and security.

Mr President, I wish to re-affirm our belief that the United Nations is the most universal body ever designed for collectively resolving humanity's common problems. Our organization has come a long way since its establishment 54 years ago. Although created in a different era and under different circumstances, and in spite of numerous constraints, the United Nations has continuously sought to adapt itself to the changes in the international political arena. It has been able to accomplish this to some degree, but it remains an institution whose working methods, procedures and administrative structure have in many respects become out-dated. Yet, the world as we know it today without the United Nations would be inconceivable. For it has come to symbolise hope for a better and more secure future for many, particularly in the developing areas of the world. Indeed, though a majority of our countries could not be members when it was created, we are, today, its strongest defenders and advocates of the ideals for which it stands. We believe in the family of nations, and within that family the strong members have the responsibility to protect and strengthen the weaker members.

Mr President, at the close of the twentieth century and the beginning of the third millennium, there is need for stock-taking and proper assessment of the implementation of previous resolutions emanating especially from the major World Summits and Conferences which took place in this decade. Such an effort would bring us closer to the realization of the purposes and objectives of our organization. In this regard, I pledge Nigeria's continued contributions and positive commitment to the ideals of the charter of the United Nations.