

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA, THABO MBEKI, AT THE OPENING OF THE 38th ASSEMBLY OF HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT OF THE OAU, Durban, 8 July 2002

I am pleased to welcome you to Durban and our country on behalf of the government and people of South Africa. We are especially honoured that we hold the 38th Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU during the year of the 90th anniversary of our movement, the African National Congress, the first modern movement for national liberation on our continent.

We trust that you will have a happy and productive stay in our country. All our people wish Your Excellencies successful deliberations that will further advance our continent and peoples towards greater unity, peace and prosperity.

We are very pleased to welcome to our country and meeting President Azali Asoumani of the Comoros, recently elected by his people after a period of instability in the Comoros, which included secession and military rule.

What the OAU and the people of the Comoros have done together to return this sister country to democracy, peace, stability and unity has demonstrated firmly and unequivocally our continent's capacity to resolve its problems.

In this regard, I would also like to extend our appreciation to the Honourable Phakalitha Mosisili, Prime Minister of Lesotho, whose country acted together with SADC to achieve similar results.

We must speak in similar terms with regard to Sierra Leone. We are pleased to have the Ministers from Sierra Leone with us who, with their people, worked with ECOWAS and the UN to restore peace and democracy to Sierra Leone.

All these must form the backdrop to and inspire us in our work over the next three days, as we consider various matters that are of vital importance to the future of our continent. These successes demonstrate that those who characterise ours as a hopeless continent are wrong. They illustrate that Africa has both the will and the capacity to take responsibility for its own renaissance.

At the 37th Assembly in Lusaka, it was decided that we should transform the OAU into the African Union on the basis of decisions taken at the Extraordinary Summit in Sirte in Libya, and the ratification by the requisite number of countries of the Constitutive Act of the African Union.

This is therefore an occasion for us to pay tribute to the OAU for the work it has done during the 39 years of its existence. Apart from anything else, we must do this because we have to ensure that we do not present the step we are about to take as the death of the OAU but its further evolution, given the changed circumstances in our continent and the world.

As with many other things African, from the very beginning of its life, the OAU was dismissed by our detractors as an organisation that was destined to fail. Each time it convened, its critics predicted that it would end in disarray and collapse.

Nevertheless the OAU proved our critics wrong. It engaged in struggle for almost four decades to realise the goals its founders had set in 1963. It created the possibility for us today to be working confidently towards the establishment of the African Union and the pursuit of the goals stated in the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

In its Charter, the OAU stated among others that it shall have the following purposes:

- * "to promote the unity and solidarity of the Africans States"; and,
- * "to eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa."

We meet today in a liberated South Africa. As the OAU was formed, we were ruled by a brutal apartheid regime, which was certain of the permanence of white minority rule and the apartheid system.

The occasion of this Assembly affords us the possibility once more to salute the leaders and peoples of Africa for everything they did to ensure that we achieve our emancipation. Many countries on our continent suffered heavy losses in human life and property, as they stood firm in their opposition to apartheid and in their support for our struggle.

Others provided the material and moral support without which victory would have been more difficult to achieve. On behalf of all our people, we thank the African leaders who are here, and through them, the millions of Africans they represent.

These words of appreciation also extend to the OAU, which lived up to its own mandate to eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa. The liquidation of the system of colonialism stands out as one of the historic achievements

of the OAU, which guarantees the Organisation a permanent place of honour in the history of the formation of modern Africa.

By successfully defeating all attempts to destroy it, the OAU kept the vision alive of the unity and solidarity of African States, and built the necessary base for movement forward towards the achievement of this goal. Once again, it is clear that without the work done by the OAU, it would not have been possible for us today to be discussing the formation of the African Union.

The history of the OAU is also the history of some of the most outstanding pan-African patriots that our peoples have ever known. These are the visionaries, strategists and activists who continue to inspire us today as we continue to confront the challenges they faced relating to the renewal of our continent. They too occupy a permanent place of honour in the history of the formation of modern Africa.

As we take new steps towards the rebirth of our continent, surely we must and will learn everything we need to learn, both from these outstanding Africans and from the continental Organisation that served as a vehicle for the realisation of the common dream.

In so doing, we will recognise and acknowledge both our successes as well as the mistakes and wrong things to which our continent has been exposed, as we have done.

It is as a result of this process of learning from our experience that we drafted and adopted the Constitutive Act of the African Union and elaborated the programme contained in the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

Among other things, that experience has told us that we must; indeed, take new steps towards the further political and economic integration of our continent and, therefore, its unity. It says that our peoples need democracy, good governance, the eradication of corruption, human rights, peace and stability.

It informs us that these masses require human development, necessitating that we eradicate poverty and attend to such questions as food security, health, education, clean water, housing, gender equality, safety and security and a healthy environment.

Our experience communicates the unequivocal message that we must respond vigorously to the challenge of ensuring the growth and development of our economies.

This must help us to expand and modernise these economies, to make them internationally competitive, and to ensure that they generate the resources to enable us to meet the objective of providing a better life for our peoples, on a sustained basis.

Our experience of the last forty years says that we have a duty radically to change the structure and content of our political, economic and social relations with the rest of the world. Among other things, we have to cease being merely an exporter of raw materials and an exporter of capital to the developed world because of an unsustainable debt burden.

We have to end the situation according to which our continent seems condemned to the increasing impoverishment of its people, continuing underdevelopment and global marginalisation.

Africans everywhere must regain their human dignity and take their place among the peoples of our universe as equals occupying their rightful place within our globalising world.

These are the matters we must address during the few days that we are in this African port city on the Indian Ocean. As before, the masses of our people expect that we will emerge from here with concrete decisions that address all these issues in a meaningful way.

Because of everything we have said and done, I venture to say that these expectations have been raised to even higher levels. Thus is the need further enhanced for us to attend to the matters at hand with more intensity that we might have done in the past. We have to aim for measurable advances and not be satisfied merely to report that we met and adopted good resolutions.

Both this consideration and our experience of a number of decades make the clear statement that we have to think and work in a new way. We have to make every effort to understand in a real way the challenging work ahead of us.

We have to overcome the debilitating effect of inertia, which makes us to act in the old ways to which we are accustomed, to do things as we have always done them because this is the way we have always done them. We have to work with the masses of our people, in a vibrant partnership for the fundamental reconstruction of our continent.

The situation demands that we make a new beginning. We have the means to do this, knowing that we have a long road ahead of us. Practical results will demonstrate whether we have the will to do what needs to be done.