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Address by Kofi Annan to the Annual Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity (OAU)

Kofi Annan

Following is the address given by Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Annual Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) at Harare:

It is an honour and a privilege for me to be here in Harare today, addressing the leaders of Africa at this Annual Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

On behalf of us all, I pay tribute to President Robert Mugabe. We thank him, and the Government and people of Zimbabwe, for the warmth of their welcome and the graciousness of their hospitality.

As a son of Africa, I am proud of the close cooperation between the OAU and the United Nations that is now almost commonplace throughout the continent. That we are working so well together is in no small part a tribute to the strong personal commitment of African leaders and to the dedication of the OAU's dynamic Secretary-General, Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim.

We must intensify and improve still further our joint efforts for peace and development.

Africa has, in the past five decades, been through a series of momentous changes. First came decolonization and the struggle against apartheid. Then came a second wave, too often marked by civil wars, the tyranny of military rule, and economic stagnation. I believe that a new era is now in prospect, Africa's third wave.

Let us make this third wave one of lasting peace, based on democracy, human rights, and sustainable development.

Portents of this third wave are all around us. We salute the democratic transitions in Namibia, in Mozambique, and, most recently, in South Africa.

In Angola, two and a half years after the signing of the Lusaka Protocol, the peace process is at last taking root.

In Liberia, the United Nations mission, working hand in hand with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the OAU, is helping to establish a durable and democratic peace.

In Western Sahara, the United Nations is redoubling its efforts to find a solution to that long stalemate.

In the Congo, we have seen a sudden shift in power. A long period of despotic rule has been brought to an end. A truly historic opportunity beckons. The entire world was relieved to see the transition take place in relative peace, and all welcome President Kabila's commitment to constitutional rule and to the holding of democratic elections.

It is necessary even now that the protection of human life and full respect for human rights are given the highest priority, and that the rule of law should quickly return to that vast and vibrant country. The United Nations asks that we may tend to the weak and the displaced, so that this new beginning may be an affirmation of the sanctity of life.

How do we build on these positive elements throughout our continent, to unleash Africa's third wave in full force?

My friends, I speak to you as a fellow African, and I speak to you from the heart: we will succeed to the extent that we embrace the primacy of democratic rule, the inviolability of human rights, and the imperatives of sustainable development.

The success of the third wave begins with a single and simple proposition -- the will of the people. The will of the people must be the basis of governmental authority in Africa, and governments, duly elected, should not be overthrown by force.

Last week, military elements in Sierra Leone toppled a democratically elected government. The Secretary-General of the OAU, the Government of Zimbabwe, and other African leaders spoke for all of us when they expressed their revulsion.

Africa can no longer tolerate, and accept as faits accomplis, coups against elected governments, and the illegal seizure of power by military cliques, who sometimes act for sectional interests, sometimes simply for their own. Armies exist to protect national sovereignty, not to train their guns on their own people.

Some may argue that military regimes bring stability and predictability, that they are helpful to economic development. That is a delusion. Look at the example of South America, where the militaries are back in their garrisons, democracy thrives, and economies soar.

Accordingly, let us dedicate ourselves to a new doctrine for African politics: where democracy has been usurped, let us do whatever is in our power to restore it to its rightful owners, the people.

Verbal condemnation, though necessary and desirable, is not sufficient. We must also ostracize and isolate putschists. Neighbouring States, regional groupings, and the international community all must play their part.

The success of Africa's third wave depends equally on respect for fundamental human rights. The conflicts which have disfigured our continent have, all too often, been accompanied by massive human rights violations.

I am aware of the fact that some view this concern as a luxury of the rich countries for which Africa is not ready. I know that others treat it as an imposition, if not a plot, by the industrialized West.

I find these thoughts truly demeaning, demeaning of the yearning for human dignity that resides in every African heart.

Do not African mothers weep when their sons or daughters are killed or maimed by agents of repressive rule? Are not African fathers saddened when their children are unjustly jailed or tortured? Is not Africa as a whole impoverished when even one of its brilliant voices is silenced?

We cannot afford to lose one life, spare one idea, relinquish one hope, if we are to succeed on our chosen course. So I say this to you, my brothers and sisters, that human rights are African rights, and I call upon you to ensure that all Africans are able fully to enjoy them.

Let us work together and with the United Nations to develop good governance and respect for the rule of law. When we succeed, Africa will have taken a great step forward.

Finally, the success of the third wave hinges on instituting sustainable development throughout Africa. The United Nations is committed to playing its full part in the struggle for sustainable development. Our continent is blessed with immense human and natural resources.

Imagine a day when assistance from the United Nations is no longer needed for humanitarian emergencies or post-conflict reconstruction, but can be redirected at long-term development needs.

Imagine a day when the outflow of capital from Africa to service debt is dwarfed by an inflow of capital-seeking job-creating investments. No -- you do not need to imagine.

For experience elsewhere in the world has shown that it can happen, and that it can happen quickly.

I pledge the full support of the United Nations, its agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions. We will continue our long-standing efforts to help create an enabling environment for economic growth and prosperity. We will continue to assist your efforts to devise new investment strategies and trade practices.

In addition, the institutional reforms that I will present to governments in July will be designed to make the United Nations a more effective instrument, reducing costs at the centre while enhancing assistance in the field. Africa should be a major beneficiary of these reforms.

To take root, sustainable development also requires major policy initiatives at the national level. Democratization and the rule of law, including respect for human rights, are indispensable. Getting economic fundamentals right is axiomatic, but sustainable development requires more.

It needs to provide access by all members of society to development opportunities. It must ensure that the property of the farmer, the shop-owner and the manufacturer is secure. It requires that education be prized, health care provided. It implies that renewable resources be managed, not depleted.

Civil society can and must play its part. Once every citizen has a real and lasting stake in the future -- politically, economically, and culturally -- there will be no limits to what our peoples, the peoples of Africa, can achieve.

My friends, the promise of Africa's third wave beckons. Our turn has come. We can eradicate poverty, settle our scattered people, restore hope, and achieve dynamism. Africa needs external assistance, and Africa deserves it; but in the final analysis, what stands between us and the future is ourselves.

Democratic rule, respect for human rights, and sustainable development are the means that will get us there. Let us embrace them -- for Africa, and for Africa's children.