

30 April 1998

Press Release
SG/SM/6544
REC/27

**SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS WOMEN'S WISDOM, ENERGIES,
CREATIVITY MUST BE HARNESSSED TO BUILD NEW AFRICA**

19980430

Following is the text of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's statement delivered today at the Conference on African Women and Economic Development, in Addis Ababa:

Thank you, Mr. Executive Secretary, for those kind words of welcome.

It is for me an honour, a privilege and a pleasure to join you today in celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).

It is an honour and a privilege, because I have come to celebrate with you the new spirit of change in Africa, the new challenges and opportunities for African women and for African development. To join with you, to share your optimism and to draw strength from your determination, is for me an honour.

And it is a privilege for me to be part of a United Nations which is poised to assist the process of change in Africa. I pay tribute to you, Sir, for all you are doing to transform ECA into an ever-more effective instrument at the service of Africa and African development.

It is a pleasure to be here in Addis, because it was here that my United Nations career began. I have only happy memories of this city and this country. I spent six wonderful years here as a young man. I have many friends here, both in the Economic Commission for Africa and in the country.

The choice of African women and African development as the themes for this anniversary conference is timely and appropriate. The women of Africa have long borne the brunt of African violence and dislocation. But they have always been a force for peace and development. Now their unique contribution can come into its own.

As we meet here today, Africa is showing overall positive economic growth for the first time in more than a decade. Africa is rediscovering stability. Investment is returning to many African countries.

As reforms help bring growth to African economies, there is a renewed sense of hope and determination. There is a new drive towards democracy. There is a growing understanding of the link between democratization, social justice and respect for human rights.

But this renaissance is threatened by the violence and turmoil which afflict many African societies. Conflict casts a shadow over Africa today.

Unless the world acts swiftly to help stem the forces which feed those African conflicts, our African future will not be bright.

For we have seen what happens when States collapse: when democracy is replaced by despotic rule; when rival militias adopt violence as their only creed; when citizens are left without the most basic conditions of stable existence; when outside powers involve themselves in the running of the country.

My recent report to the Security Council lists 30 armed conflicts in Africa over the past decade. In 1996 alone, 14 countries in Africa were affected. Those conflicts accounted for more than half the world's war-related deaths. They resulted in more than 8 million refugees, returnees and displaced persons. Often the main aim is totally destructive. Armies and militias aim to destroy not only armies but also civilians, and sometimes entire ethnic groups.

In those conflicts, women suffer disproportionately. These conflicts often take their earliest toll on those who least deserve it: those who can least defend themselves; those who have the most to lose; and those whom we can least afford to hurt.

Women have suffered in Africa, but they have been builders too. Even in the midst of war, women have kept family life going, they have cared for the sick and wounded; they have fetched water and firewood, grown crops and tended animals. It is an injustice and an outrage that women, who are the most likely to argue for peace, are also the ones most severely punished in conflicts usually created by men.

Women in Africa face significant and systematic discrimination in access to economic resources, such as land and credit. They do not participate fully in socio-political and economic decision-making processes. They make up the majority of the poor across the continent.

Women and girls are subjected to gross sexual and other violations of their personal integrity in the home, community and society, in times of

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peace, but even more so in times of crisis. African women are no longer prepared to accept these conditions.

And African societies, including the men, should reject them too.

My African sisters, let me share with you a remark once made by Eleanor Roosevelt:

"No one can be made to feel inferior without their consent."

Already the women of Africa have achieved a great deal. Their organizations and networks have repeatedly drawn attention to the needs, contributions and potential of women. Women have charted new visions and directions for peace and economic prosperity in Africa, helping societies to adapt to change and propelling societies through difficult times.

I will give just one example. During the difficult years of structural adjustment, 1983-1984, women in Ghana kept the distribution of goods and services going. They experimented with new food items to maintain the health and nutritional levels of their families.

The women's movement in Africa transformed the global feminist agenda by ensuring that development was high on the list. Today, that same movement is helping to transform Africa's own development agenda.

From the start, women's groups, working with governments, non-governmental organizations and other actors of civil society, provided the impetus for change. But at the international level, it was the series of global conferences -- Rio de Janeiro, Vienna, Cairo and Beijing -- which gave a new unity and sense of purposes to the cause of women.

The United Nations, encouraged by the example of African women, and urged on by them, has done much, but still has much to do.

More than 100 countries worldwide have now reported to the United Nations that they are implementing the various global conference action plans. The Beijing Platform for Action -- the first truly comprehensive plan on 12 areas of critical concern to women's advancement -- has become the focus for flagship programmes in several United Nations agencies in partnership with the international community, governments and civil society.

There is no going back on the Platform of Action to enhance the social, economic and political empowerment of women; to improve women's health to advance their education and training; to promote their marital and sexual rights; to combat gender-based violence.

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There is no going back on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, one of the most remarkable documents of our time. At the end of July last year 160 States had ratified the Convention. Those who are holding out, or have ratified the Convention with reservations, are going against the tide of history.

A major issue that has emerged from these global commitments is women's rights. As guaranteed in a number of international conventions, and in Africa's own charter on human and people's rights, women's fundamental rights include qualitative education and health care, a life free of violence, participation in decision-making and all political processes, and economic rights. Until these rights of women are fully observed, human rights will not be achieved.

This year, we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I urge African countries to seize this opportunity to rededicate themselves to respect for and protection of human rights, especially women's rights. Without a clear recognition that women's rights are human rights, and that they cut across all aspects of the development process, the African renaissance will grind to a halt.

Ultimately, in this struggle, as in so many others, the responsibility for change rests on African shoulders.

It can no longer come as a surprise to anyone -- including the men of Africa -- that gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.

Awareness of this truth is not new to the age we live in: nor is it limited to any one culture. In the twelfth century, the African philosopher Ibn Rushd summed up, "A society that enslaves women is a society doomed to decay."

Conversely, experience throughout the ages has shown that when we engage the minds and means of women, in any society, in any country, in any continent, everyone gains.

The challenge today is to ensure that the wisdom, the energies, and the creativity of women are fully harnessed for the benefit of all; in other words, that women are involved at every stage, at every level and at all times, in the process of building the new Africa.

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The ingenuity of women has saved Africa many times over. The inspiration of women will help Africa's renaissance bear fruit for many years to come.

Let us put behind us the violence, the conflict and the discrimination against women which have often disfigured our societies. Let us move forward to a new era of peace and prosperity in which African women play a full and equal role.

I am heartened that so many young people are here for this conference.

Let us not forget that nearly 60 per cent of Africa's population is made up of people under the age of 25. Over half of this population consists of girls and young women. African Governments, the international community and the United Nations and its agencies and programmes must work together to ensure that they do not become a lost generation.

In conclusion, I repeat my congratulations to the women of Africa for what they have achieved, and to the Economic Commission for Africa for recognizing those achievements. They provide a solid basis for tackling the massive challenges that still lie ahead.

I also thank the international community for its continued support for Africa and Africa women. I urge our men to be fully involved in the struggle to achieve gender integration and equity in Africa. And I wish all of you every success as you pursue those goals.

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