

Grand Bay (Mauritius) Declaration and Plan of Action (1999)

This influential document was adopted by the First OAU Ministerial Conference on Human Rights, held in April 1999 in Grand Bay, Mauritius.

The First OAU Ministerial Conference on Human Rights, meeting from 12 to 16 April 1999 in Grand Bay, Mauritius;

Considering that the promotion and protection of human rights is a matter of priority for Africa, and that the Conference provides a unique opportunity to carry out a comprehensive analysis and reflection on the mechanisms for the protection of human rights to guarantee human rights for accelerated development of the continent;

Recalling the Declaration on the Political and Socio-Economic Situation in Africa and the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU in 1990, as well as the Declaration establishing within the OAU, a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU in Cairo, Egypt in June 1993;

Acknowledging that observance of human rights is a key tool for promoting collective security, durable peace and sustainable development as enunciated in the Cairo Agenda for Action on re-launching Africa's socio-economic transformation adopted by the extra-ordinary session of the Council of Ministers held in Cairo, Egypt, from 25 to 28 March 1995;

Taking note of the growing recognition that violations of human rights may constitute a burden for the international community;

Reaffirming its commitment to the purposes and principles contained in the OAU Charter, UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights;

Deeply concerned by acts of genocide and other crimes against humanity perpetuated in certain parts of Africa;

Emphasising that respect for human rights is indispensable for the maintenance of regional and international peace and security and elimination of conflicts, and that it constitutes one of the fundamental bedrocks on which development efforts should be realised;

Considering the democratisation processes taking place on the Continent and the expressed desires of African peoples to live in a state of law which secures the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all peoples, regardless of their gender, race, place of origin, religion, social status, ethnic background, political opinions or language;

Further considering the importance of the right to develop, the right to international peace and security and the principles of solidarity and friendly relations between states provided for in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights;

Recalling the determination of the collective leadership in Africa to establish conditions which will ensure social justice and progress and thus enable African peoples to enjoy better standards of living in greater freedom and in the spirit of tolerance towards all;

Reiterating the need to constructively examine human rights issues in a spirit of justice, impartiality and non-selectivity, avoiding their use for political purposes;

Recognising the progress achieved by African states in the domain of human rights and the significant contribution of the African continent to the universalisation of these rights;

Further recognising the contribution made by African NGOs to the promotion and protection of human rights in Africa;

Recalling the recommendations made by the Second Conference of National Human Rights Institutions held in Durban in 1998;

Determined to consolidate the gains made in Africa in the promotion and protection of human and peoples' rights;

Solemnly adopts:

1. The Ministerial Conference affirms the principle that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and inter-related and urges governments, in their policies, to give priority to economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights.

2. The Conference also affirms that the right to development, the right to a generally satisfactory healthy environment and the right to national and international peace and security are universal and inalienable rights which form an integral part of fundamental human rights;

3. The Conference further affirms the interdependence of the principles of good governance, the rule of law, democracy and development.

4. The Conference recognises that the development of the rule of law, democracy and human rights calls for an independent, open, accessible and impartial judiciary, which can deliver justice promptly and at an affordable cost. To this end, such a system requires a body of professional and competent judges enjoying conducive conditions.

5. The Conference recognises that the core values on which human rights are founded, particularly (a) respect for the sanctity of life and human dignity, (b) tolerance of differences, and (c) desire for liberty, order, fairness, prosperity and stability, are shared across all cultures. In this connection, integrating positive traditional and cultural values of Africa into the human rights debate will be useful in ensuring their transmission to future generations.

6. The Conference notes that women and children's rights issues remain of concern to all. Therefore it welcomes the decision to elaborate a Protocol to the African Charter for the more effective protection of women's rights and calls on the OAU to convene a meeting of government experts to examine the instrument. It urges all African states to work assiduously towards the elimination of discrimination against women and the abolition of cultural practices which dehumanise or demean women and children. The Conference also recommends that states take the necessary measures to stop the practice of child-soldiers and to reinforce the protection of civilian populations, particularly children in conflict situations. The Conference further recommends that states adopt measures to eradicate violence against women and children, child labour, sexual exploitation of children, trafficking in children and to protect children in conflict with the law as well as refugee children.

7. The Conference notes that the rights of people with disability and people living with HIV/AIDS, in particular women and children, are not always observed and urges all African states to work towards ensuring the full respect of these rights.

8. The Conference is aware that violations of human rights in Africa are caused among others by:

- (a) Contemporary forms of slavery;
- (b) Neo-colonialism, racism and religious intolerance;

- (c) Poverty, disease, ignorance and illiteracy;
- (d) Conflicts leading to refugee outflows and internal population displacement;
- (e) Social dislocations which may arise from the implementation of certain aspects of structural adjustment programmes;
- (f) The debt problem;
- (g) Mismanagement, bad governance and corruption;
- (h) Lack of accountability in the management of public affairs;
- (i) Monopoly in the exercise of power;
- (j) Harmful traditional practices;
- (k) Lack of independent human rights institutions;
- (l) Lack of independence of the judiciary;
- (m) Lack of freedom of the press and associations;
- (n) Environment degradation;
- (o) Non-compliance with the provisions of the OAU Charter on territorial integrity [and inviolability of colonial borders and the right to self-determination];
- (p) Unconstitutional changes of government;
- (q) Terrorism;
- (r) Nepotism; and
- (s) Exploitation of ethnicity.

There is, therefore, the need to adopt a multi-faceted approach to the task of eliminating the cause of human rights violations in Africa.

9. While welcoming the improvements which have taken place in addressing the refugee problem, the Conference believes that the high number of refugees, displaced persons and returnees in Africa constitutes an impediment to development. It recognises the link between human rights violations and population displacement and calls for redoubled and concerted efforts by states and the OAU to address the problem.

10. The conference recognises that the development and energisation of the civil society, the strengthening of the family unit as the basis of human society, the removal of harmful traditional practices and consultation with community leaders should all be seen as building blocs in the process of creating an environment conducive to human rights in Africa and as tools for fostering solidarity among her peoples.

11. Deeply concerned about the acts of genocide, crimes against humanity and other war crimes being perpetuated in certain part of Africa, the Conference appeals to African states to ensure that such acts are definitively eradicated on the continent and recommends that these serious acts of violation be adequately dealt with.

12. Also concerned by the scourge of terrorism as a source of serious human rights violation, especially the most basic of such rights, namely the right to life, the Conference urges African countries to formulate and implement an African convention for co-operation in combating this scourge.

13. The Conference reaffirms the commitment of Africa to the promotion, protection and observance of human rights obligations. In this framework, the Conference requests those states which have not yet done so to give consideration to the ratification of all major OAU human rights conventions, in particular:

- (a) The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights;
- (b) The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;
- (c) The Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa;
- (d) The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights;
- (e) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;

- (f) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- (g) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- (h) United Nations Convention relating to the status of Refugees and its Protocol;
- (i) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women;
- (j) The Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 as well as the two Additional Protocols;
- (k) UN Convention Against Torture;
- (l) UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; and
- (m) The Statute of the International Criminal Court.

14. The Conference recognises the necessity for states to give effect to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, international humanitarian law and other major international human rights instruments which they have ratified, in their national legislations for wider effect throughout Africa.

15. The Conference reiterates the fact that the primary responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights lies with the state. It therefore urges states to establish national human rights institutions and to provide them with adequate financial resources and ensure their independence.

16. The Conference recognises that the reporting of states parties under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights provides an important mechanism and an opportunity for African governments to engage in a process of continuous dialogue with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Accordingly, the Conference recommends that states parties take appropriate measures to meet their reporting obligations under the Charter.

17. The Conference recognises the importance of promoting an African civil society, particularly NGOs, rooted in the realities of the African continent and calls on African governments to offer their constructive assistance with the aim of consolidating democracy and durable development.

18. The Conference calls upon all international organisations – governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental – to co-operate and harmonise their initiatives with the OAU and its relevant organs as well as the various sub-regional bodies within Africa for a more co-ordinated approach to the implementation of human rights in Africa and for maximum effect of such programmes and initiatives.

19. The Conference notes that the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders by the 54th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights marks a significant turning point, and calls on African governments to take appropriate steps to implement the Declaration in Africa.

20. The Conference appeals to the Secretary-General of the OAU and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to develop appropriate strategies and take measures to sensitise and raise the awareness of African peoples about human rights and international humanitarian law through formal and non-formal educational processes comprising, among others, a special module in school curricula.

21. The Conference recognises that the media are important actors for building bridges between governments and peoples; it, therefore, urges states to guarantee a free and independent press within their national borders to enable it to play a role in the promotion of human rights in Africa. To this end, the Conference appeals to the Secretary-General of the OAU to look into the possibility of providing assistance to media organisations on the continent.

22. To ensure that human rights considerations are integrated into all OAU activities, the Conference recognises the need for human rights to be reflected in the programmes of the Organization.

23. The Conference, noting that the working of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights is critical to the due observance of human rights in Africa, believes that there is a need to evaluate the structure and functioning of the Commission and to ascertain the extent to which it is implementing the Mauritius Plan of Action during the period 1996 - 2001, and to assist it to remove all obstacles to the effective discharge of its functions. There is also an urgent need to provide the Commission with adequate human, material and financial resources.

24. The Conference notes that, under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, it is the Assembly of Heads of State and Government that is authorised to take decisive action on the activity reports of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and expresses the hope that the Assembly would consider delegating this task to the Council of Ministers.

25. The Conference underscores the fact that co-operation between the African Commission and national human rights institutions will greatly enhance respect for human rights in Africa. In that regard, the Conference welcomes the decision by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to grant affiliated status to national human rights institutions.

26. Concerned by the fact that the external debt burden is crippling the development efforts of Africa and undermining the fostering and sustenance of respect for human rights, the Conference appeals to the international community, especially multilateral financial agencies, to alleviate the external debt and take all steps necessary to reduce this burden on states to enable them to fully realise the economic emancipation of their peoples and enhance the maximum enjoyment of human rights by African peoples.

27. The Conference requests the Secretary-General of the OAU to submit this Declaration to the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, all member states, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and other relevant UN organs and agencies and to examine the feasibility of making this Conference a regular feature of OAU activities.

28. The Conference recommends to states to formulate and adopt national action plans for the promotion and protection of human rights.

29. Finally, the Conference requests the Secretary-General of the OAU to submit a report to the next session of the Council of Ministers on the outcome of this Conference.