

Address at the Opening of the 24th General Assembly of the World Veterans Federation

1 December 2003

Master of Ceremonies,
Honourable Ministers,
Leaders of the World Veterans Federation,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen:

On behalf of our government and people I am very pleased to welcome you to the 24th General Assembly of the World Veterans Federation. We are deeply honoured that the Federation chose to hold this General Assembly in South Africa and Africa, and wish our foreign visitors a successful stay in our country.

As you know so well, our country and continent have not been spared the trauma of war. Even as we speak there are a number of African countries that are not at peace. As with all military conflicts, those on our continent leave behind a haunting legacy not only of death but of war veterans who need the closest attention and support by their societies, soldiers and civilians who carry many disabilities, displaced persons, and destroyed infrastructure.

I am indeed very pleased that this General Assembly will discuss many of these questions with a view to ensuring that all our countries and the international community as a whole respond to the consequences of war and military conflict in an appropriate manner that reaffirms respect for human life and the dignity of all persons.

As a country we too still face the consequences of various military conflicts that took place both within our country and outside our borders. Among others, we have a continuing responsibility to ensure that our own war veterans are treated properly and given the support they so richly deserve. Our government is therefore very interested in the outcome of your deliberations, which should help us to improve our performance with regard to the welfare of our war veterans.

Obviously, dear delegates, we cannot meet at such an Assembly and not reflect on the issue of war itself. If von Clausewitz was correct that "war is not merely a political act, but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means", then we must reflect on the efficacy of contemporary politics to resolve the challenges that face humanity.

I am certain that nobody who has experienced the destructive fury of war would wish to see any people exposed to military conflict. I am therefore convinced that the World Veterans Federation cannot but be among the foremost advocates in the world for peace and the resolution of conflicts by peaceful means. The conflicts currently taking place in various parts of the world, including Africa, emphasise this point, that all of us must raise our voices in favour of peace and the resolution of all conflicts by peaceful means.

Recently, I finished reading a book by another war veteran, the Canadian General Roméo Dallaire. As you know, he commanded the UN troops that experienced the terrible genocide in Rwanda in 1994. He too became a casualty to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, because of the horrendous massacres to which he and his fellow soldiers were exposed.

General Dallaire has communicated an important and urgent message to all of us. He writes:

"No matter how idealistic the aim sounds, this new century must become the Century of Humanity, when we as human beings rise above race, creed, colour, religion and national self-

interest and put the good of humanity above the good of our own little tribe – for the sake of the children and of our future.”

I believe that all of us must espouse this vision and pursue it daily so that we banish war from the process of structuring relations among human beings and between societies.

Certainly as Africans we understand the full import of General Dallaire’s message. We do so because of our experience. That experience includes the slaughter of over 800,000 people in Rwanda in a mere 100 days in 1994. It includes the death and maiming of thousands of people in our own country because some were intent on perpetuating the apartheid crime against humanity.

We have seen barbaric acts carried out in Sierra Leone, with limbs chopped off, bodies mutilated, women abused in the most gruesome manner, souls destroyed, all in the course of the conduct of what some considered to be a justifiable war.

We are confronted with the task to end a war in the Sudan that has gone on for decades, resulting in the death of at least two million people. We all pray that the current negotiations taking place between the Sudanese belligerents will, at last end the slaughter by determining the ways and means by which the Sudanese people will order the political relations among themselves so that none feels any need to resort to war.

This also applies to the Cote d’Ivoire, which threatens to explode again into an orgy of mass killings unless the people of that country find it within themselves to respond to the call made by General Dallaire to “rise above race, creed, colour, religion and national self-interest and put the good of humanity above the good of our own little tribe...”

I am happy to say that today South Africa is at peace. Rwanda is at peace. Sierra Leone is at peace. Angola and Mozambique are at peace. The Democratic Republic of Congo is at peace. Liberia and Burundi are very close to attaining this goal. Africa continues to march forward towards the transformation of the 21st into the Century of Humanity visualised by General Dallaire.

But the legacy of war will remain, challenging us to respond positively to the decisions that will be taken at this 24th General Assembly of the World Veterans Federation. That legacy includes the anti-personnel mines that litter the African landscape.

It includes the proliferation of small arms that are used to commit crime and threaten the safety and security of million of people on our continent. It includes the emergence of the phenomenon of mercenaries, especially in West Africa, people who are armed and have no skills except to kill, and who are ready to earn a living by hiring out this deadly skill.

Today is World AIDS Day, which enables the peoples of the world to focus on the challenge to address this particular Syndrome. This must also remind us more generally, of the disastrous health situation that faces the peoples of Africa and poor people throughout the world, the millions who die early because they do not have the means to give them the possibility to enjoy longer lives, including mere access to clean water.

This is part and parcel of the central reality of African actuality – the reality of endemic and deepening poverty. The wars we have visited on ourselves have made a bad situation worse, as so clearly demonstrated in all our countries. This underlines the truth that as Africans, we need peace and stability to achieve the eradication of the poverty and underdevelopment that have condemned millions of Africans to misery, early death and the denial of human dignity.

We are, of course, also deeply concerned about the situation in the Middle East. We are convinced that ways have to be found to end the deadly conflicts that affect the peoples of Iraq, Israel and Palestine. We are convinced that it is not beyond the capabilities of human genius to determine the realistic direction in which we should move, to arrive at a situation of peace, democracy, peaceful coexistence and prosperity for the peoples of Iraq, Israel and Palestine.

What seems perfectly clear is that the use of force, on its own, will only beget yet more killings. I am certain that none of us desire or intend that this is how we should define the 21st century.

General Dallaire has made the observation that:

“The global village is deteriorating at a rapid pace, and in the children of the world the result is rage. It is the rage I saw in the eyes of the teenage Interahamwe militiamen in Rwanda. It is the rage I sensed in the hearts of the children of Sierra Leone. It is the rage I felt in crowds of ordinary civilians in Rwanda, and it is the rage that resulted in September 11. Human beings who have no rights, no security, no future, no hope and no means to survive are a desperate group who will do desperate things to take what they believe they need and deserve...”

It must surely be one of the tasks of this General Assembly to help us find the ways and means to end that rage, to give hope to all humanity so that desperation does not lead to terrorism, so that we no longer see the “monstrous anger of the guns” and the “stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” of which Wilfred Owen wrote in his poem, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”.

I wish you success in your deliberations and declare the 24th General Assembly of the World Veterans Federation officially open.

Thank you.