

Statement by Dr. Ishmael Noko
General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation

Nouakchott, 29 May 2000

The Lutheran World Federation, a communion of 128 member churches in about 70 countries around the world and representing over 59 million people, last year celebrated a quarter of a century of partnership with the peoples and Government of Mauritania. The LWF first came to this country in response to the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the great drought in the early seventies. That emergency assistance role has now evolved into a focus on facilitating the development and implementation of strategies for integrated community development.

The LWF believes that sustainable development can only be effectively promoted through partnerships and broad civil society participation. In Mauritania, the LWF has recently focussed specifically upon building local capacities through its *Support and Mobilization of Local NGOs* project, and has sought to develop close working relationships with national non-governmental organizations.

The LWF especially welcomes the space that the Mauritanian Government has opened for civil society, represented through national and international NGOs, to work with the Government towards sustainable development in this country and the realization of the economic, social and cultural rights of its peoples. The LWF is now a contractual partner of the Mauritanian Government in three major projects - addressing the key challenge of poverty alleviation, and it looks forward to an ever closer and more constructive relationship with the Government, based on dialogue, mutual understanding and a sense of common mission.

In working together with NGOs, the Mauritanian Government gives an example to all the continent of the necessity and practicality of alliances between governments and civil society in addressing the critical challenges of today. Whilst both must respect each other's distinctive roles, it is clear that neither can successfully face those challenges without the other.

In visiting Mauritania, I have been struck once again by the great resources of faith that are to be found on the African continent. Africa is among the least secular continents on earth, and

Mauritania illustrates the way in which, in Africa, faith provides the essential foundation for all our efforts.

In that sense, the Lutheran World Federation is a natural partner for the peoples and Government of Mauritania, despite our different faith traditions. The LWF's involvement in providing humanitarian assistance, in encouraging and facilitating sustainable and participatory development, and in promoting human rights and economic justice is founded upon and driven by our faith conviction that all people bear the image of God and share a God-given human dignity.

I believe that a strong foundation in faith enables the peoples of Mauritania and of Africa as a whole to continue to work and struggle in hope, despite the grave challenges which have faced us in the past, which face us today, and which will face us in the future.

A faith-based approach also involves an acknowledgement of all aspects of human life and struggle, and the formulation of integrated strategies that reflect the indivisible nature of human life in dignity. It is precisely such an approach that, in my view, promotes the sustainable development of communities, rather than the mere fulfillment of narrow economic indicators.

In this regard, I welcome the ongoing efforts of the Mauritanian Government to redress past wrongs and to repatriate those Mauritanians who were expelled or fled into Sénégal in 1989 to 1990, to restore land to the landless, and to eliminate gender discrimination and to empower both women and men. I encourage the Government of Mauritania to increase its efforts to build this nation through reconciliation and inclusion, of women and men, of all ethnic groups, of all cultures, of all religious traditions and of all sectors of society.

Mauritania's position in Africa is like that of a fulcrum, between north and south, and embracing both Arab and Black African populations. It therefore has a key role to play in providing an example of African unity. It has also shown leadership and courage in its recognition of the state of Israel, against the objections of some other Islamic nations. And in actively working to eliminate the practice of female genital mutilation, it has shown a preparedness to name and reject negative cultural practices.

I have recently seen a number of newspaper articles referring to the 'hopelessness' of Africa. Current international headlines concerning Africa might tend to bear this view out: war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in Sierra Leone, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in Angola; political violence and intimidation in my own country, Zimbabwe; drought and famine in the Horn; the HIV/AIDS pandemic in many African countries; and the grinding poverty that continues to afflict so many millions of our people.

So many of these challenges seem insurmountable, and the recurrent cycles of human rights violations and conflict are apt to create a sense of hopelessness. And yet there is hope - hope based in our strong faith traditions - which sustain and support us in the face of even such trials as these. Strength of faith is a resource without which, in the African context, hope could hardly exist nor an attempt be made to face the challenges ahead.

The efforts by the Mauritanian Government, through its Commissariat of Human Rights, Poverty Alleviation and Integration, to address the enormous problem of poverty throughout this nation, demonstrates a breadth of vision and sense of hope which draws its inspiration from this country's strong faith tradition. The fact that this work is being undertaken in partnership with international and national civil society partners, including those (such as the LWF) representing different faith traditions, illustrates the Mauritanian Government's recognition of the necessity of building alliances for addressing this fundamental developmental and social challenge.

In the wider African context, and facing problems which do not respect national or political boundaries, I believe that there is an urgent need for marshalling the faith resources of the different religious communities in Africa, in order to provide a regional inter-faith response to issues of critical and common concern.

In addressing the tragic prevalence of conflict in Africa, it is especially crucial that the religions and faith communities should work actively together to resist the misuse of religious differences for the purpose of creating enemy images and justifying conflict, and in order to promote dialogue and mutual understanding across all boundaries - national, religious, ethnic, and economic. Religions and faith communities have a special responsibility in this regard, given the key role they have, particularly in Africa, in forming the outlook and influencing the opinions of people throughout our societies.

Nor is this just a matter to be considered by religions and faith communities within the parameters of national boundaries. Just as conflict situations invariably have both external causes and external consequences, and just as faith is not circumscribed by political boundaries, the engagement of religions and faith communities in relation to issues of conflict and peace must necessarily be undertaken in a broader regional context.

I am therefore proposing that representatives of religions and faith communities present in Africa should meet in order to discuss these issues, and their common role in promoting conflict resolution and a culture of peace in this continent. The religions and faith communities of Africa can, I am convinced, if they are prepared to work together, do much to break the cycle of violent conflict in which our continent seems to be lost.

I also consider that broader inter-faith cooperation across national borders in Africa can greatly enhance current initiatives to address poverty in Africa. A faith-based perspective can help to balance the underlying ethic of economic competition which is so prevalent in economic governance today throughout the world, in favour of an ethic of solidarity and compassion, focussing on the most vulnerable in our communities and the victims of past and existing injustices. Moreover, this is a perspective which is in great need of re-insertion in the discussion of economic governance at the global level.

In this regard, and from the standpoint of a partner of the peoples of Mauritania in promoting sustainable development in this country, I am pleased to hear that substantial debt relief has been committed for Mauritania under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. I earnestly hope and pray that the right strategies and means can be found, through broad consultation and participation, for ensuring that this relief is directed to those who need it most, and who have borne the heaviest load of the unsustainable debt burden that Mauritania has been obliged to carry. I also pray that in the forthcoming meeting of the Group of Seven in July, that the political will can be mustered to go further and remove in a sustainable way the crushing debt burden of all heavily indebted poor countries.

To the international community, I say that in your response to the plight of Africa you must go beyond the tragic pictures of hungry children. You must go beyond acts of mercy, to acts of togetherness. Africa is not an alien place. It is a human place. What is wrong here is also a

signal, sometimes amplified, of what is wrong in humanity. The international community's response to the struggles of the peoples of Africa should be seen in the context of self-help, rather than charity, and should focus on the root causes rather than the symptoms.

To the peoples and governments of the continent of Africa, I say that in respect of all of the many issues that threaten human wellbeing and dignity, I believe that inter-faith dialogue and common action can restore our hope, strengthen our response and ensure progress. It is also my firm conviction that that dialogue and common action must be seen not only in a national context but in the broader regional context of the continent of Africa.

The efforts of the government and peoples of Mauritania provide a clear example of action in hope, based on the firm foundation of faith. Throughout Africa, this foundation of faith - whether Islam, Christianity, Buddhism or African traditional religions - provides a common basis on which structures of solidarity and effective action can be built. I pray that people of faith and goodwill across Africa will join together to build those structures, and to show Africa to the world as a Continent of Faith.