



COMMUNIQUE

THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION CONVENES A CONSULTATIVE SEMINAR ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS MEMORIAL AT THE AU HEADQUARTERS

Addis Ababa, 5 November 2011: A Consultative Seminar was held in Addis Ababa, from 4 to 5 November 2011, to discuss and agree on modalities for building a permanent Memorial for the victims of human rights violations, including genocide, within the AU Headquarters. This initiative builds upon an earlier undertaking to ensure that the victims of the genocide in Rwanda and the Red Terror in Ethiopia are recognized and commemorated at the AU Headquarters.

The meeting was addressed by Political Affairs Commissioner and Acting Chairperson of the Commission Julia Dolly Joiner. In her statement, she recalled the commitment of the AU to human rights, and noted the significance of establishing a Memorial on the site of the former Addis Ababa central prison, which is now the location of the new AU Conference Centre. She underlined that this initiative is “a matter of national and international import”, and indicated some of the many forms that memorials may take, including providing a location for events such as lectures and exhibitions. She underlined that establishing the planned Memorial would be “a reminder and recognition of a darker past, an affirmation of the resolve to respect the dignity of human kind, and a commitment to prevent future recurrence of such acts”. The opening session of the meeting was also attended by the Commissioner for Peace and Security, Ramtane Lamamra.

The meeting drew upon the discussions and recommendations of the first Consultative Seminar, held in November 2010, at the initiative of the AU Commission. In addition to the AU, participants also included some Permanent Representatives to the AU, survivors’ groups, representatives of African museums and African civil society, experts and international partners.

Participants agreed upon the need for an event immediately prior to the inauguration of the new Conference Centre, which would acknowledge the nature of the *Alem Bekagn* site, and provide an opportunity for survivors to recount their testimonies, and leaders from across Africa to address the issue. They also pointed to a calendar of commemorative events, including the Memorial Day for the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda (7 April), the day of commemorating slavery, apartheid and others, which would be opportunities for public events at the site of the Memorial.

In this regard, the meeting agreed on the need to identify and safeguard particular locations within the compound of the Conference Centre, including the places which had been the site for executions, to serve as places of remembrance.

Participants discussed how best to organize competitions for the design of both permanent memorials and temporary exhibitions, and made specific recommendations for how these could be managed.

The importance of the AU Memorial for African memorials, survivors and civil society organizations was stressed, and participants proposed forming a network of African organizations that can contribute to the Memorial and related events, and can in turn gain from them.

One of the priorities of the Memorial is public education and, to that end, the meeting agreed that a dedicated website be established to provide a forum for contributions from across Africa and to publicize the Memorial and related activities.

In the spirit of collaboration between the AU and African civil society, the meeting proposed that an Interim Board be established, including representatives of the victims and survivors' groups, museums and memorials, and civil society, with authority over the Memorial and related events. In due course, this Board would be transformed into a permanent entity.

The recommendations of the Seminar will inform the next steps that will be taken by the Commission towards the establishment of the AU Memorial. The Chairperson of the Commission will update the forthcoming AU Summit, in January 2012.

NOTE TO THE EDITORS

The site of the construction of the new AU Conference Centre has a unique historical significance. Between 1935 and 2005, it was occupied by the Addis Ababa central prison known as *Alem Bekagn*, “farewell to the world.” In 1936, it was the main location of the “Graziani Massacre,” in which the Italian fascist Governor rounded up and killed the cream of the Ethiopian elite in retribution for an attempt on his life. Under Emperor Haile Selassie, *Alem Bekagn* was the prison in which both common criminals and political prisoners were interned, and became a *de facto* college for educating the revolutionary generation. Many of the leaders of the Eritrean nationalist movement were imprisoned there. Immediately following the 1974 Revolution, the prison was the site for the execution and burial of sixty Ministers from the Imperial Government. It gained notoriety for the large-scale imprisonment, torture and execution of thousands of Ethiopians during the days of the Derg Regime, especially the Red Terror atrocities of 1977-78. Members of the Ethiopian Royal Family, political leaders, students, and others spent years in *Alem Bekagn*. When the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) forces took control of Addis Ababa, in 1991, they threw open the gates of the prison. The land was handed over to the African Union for its use for expanding its headquarters in 2005.

On the eve of the handing over of the site, and the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, on 7 April 2004, it was agreed that a permanent memorial to the victims of human rights abuses, including the Red Terror and the Rwanda Genocide, be established at the site. The then Chairperson of the Commission, President Alpha Oumar Konaré, resolved that this memorial would be a priority activity. However, the handover of the land was delayed for some time until the new Addis Ababa central prison could be completed.

In his January 2010 report to the Assembly on the Year of Peace and Security in Africa, the Chairperson of the Commission, Dr. Jean Ping, indicated that, among other activities planned to celebrate the YoPS, the Commission would *“initiate steps to build a permanent Memorial to the victims of human rights violations, including genocide, within the African Union headquarters”*.

As a follow up, the Commission convened, in Addis Ababa, from 15 to 16 November 2010, a Consultative Seminar on the Human Rights Memorial. The Seminar provided an opportunity to brainstorm on the forms of the envisaged Memorial – these could range from the simplest (a public work of art) through an educational or museum function, to an institution with ongoing and proactive activities in the field of human rights. More specifically, and drawing upon relevant national and international experiences, especially in Africa, the Seminar outlined the different options that the AU might consider for the design of the Memorial.

The Seminar recommended that there should be permanent and temporary memorials and exhibits and events concerning human rights at the AU Headquarters. The planned Memorial should manifest both the duty to remember (providing a place of remembrance and mourning)

and the duty to overcome denial, silence and forgetting (providing opportunities for education and awareness-building).

The Seminar came out with proposals including: (a) a Space for Memorial at the AU New Building Complex Site; and (b) an AU Human Rights Inaugural Event to be organized to mark the AU Memorial. The seminar also proposed that the Memorial should consist of two dimensions: an outside (outdoor) Memorial design that would be devoted to the victims of human rights violation and an inside design in the new building that would serve as a rotational exhibition ground of human rights, and other events that demand memorializing such as slavery, apartheid, and other forms of abuses.

At its 16th Ordinary Session held in Addis Ababa, from 30 to 31 January 2011, the Assembly of the Union considered the Final Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Implementation of the Year of Peace and Security. In the decision adopted on that occasion, the Assembly expressed *“satisfaction at the successful observance, across the continent of Peace Day, on 21st September 2010, ...as well as other outreach and programmatic activities undertaken as part of the Year of Peace and Security in Africa, including ...the building of a Memorial on Human Rights.”*

The follow up Seminar convened on 4 and 5 November 2011 had the following objectives: (a) detail out the goals of the AU Human Rights Memorial (with regards to official mourning, healing, reconciliation, education, development and promotion of human rights norms); (b) draft rules of the anticipated ‘Design Competition’ for the permanent memorials; (c) ensure that participation includes a wider group of survivors/victims organizations, memorial museums; (d) establish the association with other planned AU memorials and works of art (such as a peacekeepers’ memorial, busts of African nationalist leaders); and establish a linkage with AU Rwanda Genocide Memorial Day.