

Message by Mr. Luc Gnacadja
Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
(UNCCD) on the occasion of the World Environment Day
5 June 2008

Excellency Prime Minister,
Honorable Minister of Environment, ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Earth.

It gives me great pleasure to celebrate with your esteemed Government the World Environment Day at a time when our planet is assailed by many major challenges and threats of global magnitude, and is calling for more responsibility and accountability in order to promote and secure the sustainability of life. I praise your country for its resolute effort and successes scored in addressing those issues.

Today, and so rightly, the convergence of the attention of leaders of the world is on Climate change, “the threat multiplier”. Somewhere at its margin, Desertification, “the silent killer” is still the under-recognized threat. However with the current food crisis, the same leaders are starting to realize however that taking care of land, the core mandate of the UNCCD, constitutes a strategic response to address climate change concerns in that a well managed land contributes to adaptation, mitigation and resilience of affected countries.

Desertification is synonymous to land degradation which as you know constitutes a global threat because all regions of this world are affected. The degradation of land and soil occurring in the drylands, is the “skin disease of planet Earth” and is due to both climatic and human factors. The drylands represent 41% of the global terrestrial area and one third of the global population; they are home of two thirds of the world’s poor.

Here in South Korea, dust and sandstorm are real threat to the well-being of the people.

Desertification and climate change are interlinked in many ways.

Extreme climatic events such as droughts, sandstorms and floods are worsening the degradation of the land with drastic and negative effects to the most vulnerable populations around the world.

Desertification contributes to climate change because land degradation reduces carbon storage, contributing to global warming. Furthermore, it also reduces the world’s biodiversity because 8 of the 25 global “biodiversity hotspots” identified by Conservation International are in drylands.

Today the world food system is again under stress, but the food crisis we cyclically face at the global level is structural and hunger is prevalent in the drylands. The phenomenon of land degradation, desertification and drought or water scarcity has major bearing on the potential of the arable lands to produce adequate food.

Yes indeed, the desertification aggravated by climate change “represents the greatest environmental challenges of our times”.

They are, as the Secretary General of the United Nations said, “two major manifestations of the same global environmental challenge which together seriously threaten

our ability to reach the Millennium Development Goals by 2015". The most effective way to address them is through a joint approach. A common approach has multiple advantages.

Efforts to combat desertification represent today the untapped potential to successfully address the adaptation and mitigation agenda of climate change, while improving the well-being of affected populations.

The World Environment Day should help us remind the public and decision makers to use initiatives, which benefit not only the global issue of climate change but also those people living through the hardships that climate change and desertification have caused. By addressing desertification, we can make a large and effective impact on climate change. All of the world will be thankful when our ecosystems can again provide a sustainable living to those in the drylands. And this has been recognized by the UNCCD Ten-Year Strategy which makes the improvement of ecosystems one of its corner stones.

I wish you a successful celebration of the World Environment Day.