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Statement by

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Mr. Chairman,
The Secretary General, Mr. Koffi Annan,
Honourable Ministers
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

Allow me to congratulate the secretariat and all concerned for the excellent arrangement it has put into place to ensure our facilitation and participation at this meeting. I am greatly honoured and privileged to address this meeting and share some thoughts on forests.

Some fifty years ago, not too far from my childhood home there was a river, which roared down so powerfully that when people sang about the Jordan river in my local church on Sundays, I thought of it and listened to it. Its name is Gura and from a distance it looked white because of the foam formed by the huge rounded boulders in the river. The first explorers in Kenya at the beginning of the 20th century described it as a beautiful cold river and rated it the 2nd fastest river in Africa. Its source is the Aberdare Range Mountains.

Even as I was experiencing this river the natural forests on the mountains were being clear cut to establish commercial plantations of imported trees especially pines from the Northern hemisphere and the eucalyptus from the South. This was done to provide raw materials to the emerging timber and paper industries, very good economic reasons. Local communities were also allowed to move into the plantations and cultivate food crops and thereby also attend to the young saplings. These cultivators and the foresters formed a close symbiotic relationship that eventually became a need: foresters needed cultivators and the cultivators needed the land to grow food crops. Eventually more natural forests were converted into farms of commercial plantations.

Some sixty years later the forest is heavily degraded. The river no longer roars and it no longer has white foam. Instead, the boulders, which caused the roar and foam, gape out of the riverbed, dry and desolate. Gura is luckier than other rivers and streams, which have dried up completely. Rain patterns have changed and this years prediction are dire for Kenya: There will be crop failure and the Minister of agriculture already predicts food shortage and is preparing to import food. We are also told there will be severe power rationing in the months to come due to low levels of water in the hydropower dams. This will have adverse effects on the lives of many Kenyans and the industrial sector.

In the constituency I represent in Parliament, when I asked the people what their priorities are they let me know that water is priority number one. Yet my constituency borders the Aberdare Forest Mountain Range. They had a water project before, but it has failed because there is now not adequate water at the source: the river flow is too low to support the project. Therefore, we require the Ministry of water to invest in more pipes and get water from another river, further upstream, where there is more water. In drier areas, people are digging deeper boreholes as underground reservoirs recede.

Although climate change may also play a part, (They do say that the glaciers on Mt. Kenya and Mt. Kilimanjaro are melting), it is also possible that the long-term impact of encroaching on natural forested mountains is catching up with us. When it does rain there is massive soil erosion, which are partly responsible for the silting in dams, frustrating the Ministry of Energy, which gets much of its electricity from hydropower.

Last year the Norwegian Nobel Committee, in awarding the 2004 Prize to the environment and linking it with democracy and peace, sent a message to the world: We must manage the environment more sustainably, accountably and responsibly. We must promote justice, fairness and equity. We can only do that if we have democratic space, where rights are respected: rights of all people (women, children, minorities, the poor and the marginalized). We must promote cultures of peace (listen to each other and dialogue with each other). These three themes: environment, democracy and peace are the foundation for any stable and secure state. People who are excluded, oppressed and frustrated become angry and undermine peace and security.

In this respect, I particularly wish to make an appeal for the Congo Forest Ecosystem in particular and all forests in general.

Mr. Chairman,

In early February, H.E. the President of the Republic of Congo, Mr. Denis Sassou Nguesso invited me to address the Second Central Africa Head of States Summit on Conservation and Sustainable Development of Forest Ecosystems. At that meeting, the Heads of States appointed me a Goodwill Ambassador for the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystems.

I believe that the leaders of Africa, especially those from the Central Africa sub-region are committed to sustainable management of forests, and especially the Congo Basin ecosystem. They want to conserve the rich biodiversity and sustainably manage these ecosystems.

The Congo Basin forest ecosystem is a special category because it is the second largest (only second to the Amazon in its size and role). It comprises 200 million hectares (about 18 percent of the world's tropical forests) and carries about 400 mammalian species and more than 10,000 plant species. It is also home to thousand of indigenous people, who depend on the ecosystem to sustain their livelihoods. At the Brazzaville Summit, the Heads of States signed a Treaty committing themselves and national resources to conserving and sustainably managing this heritage. I would like to commend them and appeal for their support.

We have raised the fate of this ecosystem at different forums including at FAO in Rome and in Brussels where I was privileged to accompany

President Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo. I appeal to all leaders to support the Heads of States of the Central African region, in particular and indeed the entire African region in general so that they save, protect and conserve the Congo Basin Forests Ecosystem and other national forests.

We all know the importance of these forests but especially both the Amazon and the Congo Basins forest ecosystems. They are responsible for the ecological balance of our planet, they absorb carbon, combat desertification, offer safeguards against flooding and soil erosion and are a rich reservoir of genetic resources and are habitats for wildlife. They provide wealth and serve as water catchment areas.

Unfortunately, meeting, consultations and strategic plans are rarely translated into action. In the meantime, the environment continues to be degraded because leaders have yet to make decisions on what actions to take.

It is for this reason that I have been greatly encouraged by the initiatives taken by the Heads of States of the Central African region towards the Congo Forest Ecosystems. They have taken the following steps:

1. Developed national policies and necessary legislation to manage forests sustainably.
2. Formed an open-ended partnership between countries of the Central African sub-region and a few development partners to address the challenge presented by the Congo Basin.
3. Developed a Convergence Plan, which is a common vision of 11 Central Africa countries, for a sustainable and joint management of their forest resources.
4. Committed themselves to finance 40% of the total cost of the Convergence Plan through the cancellation of their debts where resources saved through such cancellation, would be used to finance conservation projects.
5. Ensured that sustainable management of the Forest Ecosystem is strengthened within NEPAD.
6. Established the Africa Timber Organizations to ensure better harvesting and marketing of Forest products from the Congo Forest Ecosystem.

Mr. Chairman, in this connection I would like to commend FAO, which has also played an active role in support of the Central Africa Forests Commission (COMIFAC) and in the development and revision of the Convergence Plan, and has been very active in Central African Countries in various projects related to forest management, forest conservation and capacity building.

These efforts should be supported because the ecosystem is central to conservation of biodiversity, climate change, agriculture, energy source and water. Managing these resources more sustainably and indeed sharing them more equitably would greatly reduce conflicts in the sub-region since many of the conflicts are being waged over access and control of resources. It was in recognition of the importance of this ecosystem that the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 54/214 of February 2000.

Pressure to encroach forests comes both from poor populations and the excuse is poverty and landlessness. There are also the not-so-poor. Both want to access the resources in forests. I know that both can find alternatives to support their livelihoods and to meet their needs. Unfortunately, the services we get from forests cannot be provided by alternatives. Once we lose these ecosystems, it is often forever. Unfortunately, loss of the ecosystems only exacerbates poverty.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During the Jubilee 2000 campaign, many governments, who were owed money by poor developing countries, a good number of them in Africa, argued that they would not cancel the debts because it would not be the poor people, in whose name the campaign was waged, who would benefit from such cancellation. Rather, it would be the corrupt ruling elites, who had misappropriated the money to begin with. Therefore, corruption, lack of accountability, transparency and efficiency justified non-cancellation of debts.

I bring this issue of governance up front because I know that it is a bone of contention among development partners. For almost a decade now there has been a new level of consciousness and commitment to good governance in Africa. Many African leaders deliberately pursue democratic principles, accountability, transparency and efficiency.

That is partly why leaders in the Central African sub-region recommend that upon the cancellation of debts, resources made available for conservation be placed in a Trust Fund, to be managed by representatives of governments, development partners and members of the private sector and the civil society. Also to have monitoring procedures to guarantee the adequate use of the debt conversion for conservation projects. We would like to request FAO and other multilateral partners such as the Global Environment Facility, World Bank, African Development Bank, UNEP and the European Union to support this venture and help us to set up this Trust Fund. To ensure that there is accountability, transparency and efficiency, the regulations governing this Trust Fund should be formulated by all the partners involved.

Some developed countries have demonstrated confidence in the leadership in Africa and have for example cancelled the debts. We express our gratitude to the government of Italy, which has paved the way by cancelling her bilateral debt with all the Central Africa countries to assist them in the implementation of the Convergence Plan. Other G8 members have recommended new ways to finance development in Africa. We should all be very grateful for the discussion and consultations that are currently going on. We do hope that G8 leaders will agree on some action, including the conservation of African forests in general but the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystem in particular.

The FAO and other UN Agencies can assist by providing expertise assistance and help to identify resources for the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystems. For this reason, we strongly believe that FAO should play an instrumental role in the implementation of the Convergence Plan for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa.

In recent times we have been comparing the recent tsunami tragedy, which hit the countries of the Indian Ocean with many silent tsunamis in Africa and have been wondering aloud why the world responded with unprecedented compassion and generosity to the Indian Ocean Tsunami but remain relatively silent to the silent Tsunamis. It was a great show of the best of humanity and everyone was deeply touched and grateful. We witnessed the power of the waves and saw our own vulnerability against such natural phenomenon. Yet the many tsunamis in Africa pass completely unnoticed except by the victims and their families. Why are

the responses so different? Why is it that the same humanity, that responded so passionately to the killer waves in the Indian Ocean hardly responds to the silent tsunamis in Africa? We seem to accept them as the face of Africa, something expected, natural to the region. We document it, broadcast it and comment about it. Yet we take no action. Why is that?

Ladies and Gentlemen:

From my own personal experience, we have to demonstrate a high level of seriousness and commitment in the management of the environment so that the rest of the world can act accordingly.

Thank you very much.