

20 September 2011

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,
President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Opening of the High-level Meeting on “Addressing
Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought in the Context of
Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication”**

Heads of State and Government, Excellencies, Mr. Secretary-General, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my distinct honor to welcome you to this historic high-level meeting on “Addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication”.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the leadership of the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon and the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Mr. Luc Nacajas, on this important issue. I would also like to thank Member States for their tireless efforts in bringing desertification to the agenda of the General Assembly. The role of the G77 deserves particular appreciation in this respect.

Desertification is one of the most complex challenges of our time. It has serious environmental, economic, political and social impacts that affect people, most of whom are poor. According to estimates by the United Nations Environmental Programme, one quarter of our earth's land is threatened by desertification and the livelihoods of over 1 billion people in more than 100 countries are jeopardized by desertification. Desertification also threatens to critically undermine gains achieved in sustainable development. The economic social and human cost of desertification is tremendous and I call upon the international community to take immediate and decisive action to address its impacts and to take measures for both its prevention and reversal.

A silent killer, drought has hit East Africa this year and once again, the world is witness to unimaginable human suffering. Countries in this region are experiencing the worst drought in 60 years. In the past three months alone, this famine has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Somali children under the age of 5 and it has caused possibly permanent social disruption as people have been forced to move from their communities, villages and towns. This is the most severe food crisis in the world today and it still requires urgent and concerted action at the global level.

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Global attention to addressing natural resource scarcity and land degradation has no doubt been on the increase, particularly in connection with the challenges of climate change and food crisis. However, our common efforts thus far have fallen short.

Major innovative policy interventions and shifts in sustainable land management strategies will be needed to address the impacts of desertification. Such interventions require moving towards an ambitious quantitative target and a “Zero net land degradation rate”. Effective restoration and rehabilitation of degraded lands and dry lands requires the design of new policies and technologies that promote sustainable resource use as well as predictable financial resources to support domestic initiatives. These strategies must ensure the active engagement of all stakeholders and local communities.

A number of important global conferences on sustainable development will be held this year. In October, the international community will meet in the Republic of Korea at the tenth session of the Conference of the Parties. Today’s discussion among world leaders is an excellent opportunity to help stimulate a decisive outcome at COP10. The 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro is also around the corner. I urge Member States to ensure a forward-looking outcome at Rio+20 that reaffirms the balance between the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development. I would also encourage Members States in their deliberations to reaffirm the fulfillment of commitments to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and its 10-year strategic plan and framework, and to further enhance the implementation of the Convention.

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Effectively addressing desertification and land degradation can only be done in the context of other major global challenges, such as climate change, poverty eradication, food security, deforestation and biodiversity loss.

I would like to address one of these issues in particular today: food security.

Food security is an urgent issue before us. People in arid countries, in particular, are impacted daily by food insecurity. Many face severe malnutrition and undernourishment, and their health is compromised. Malnutrition has a particularly lasting impact on children, whose development and growth is stunted. These countries have begun to understand the importance of building on their own country-led initiatives to address the root causes of food insecurity and are collaborating to form south-south, triangular and global alliances that would allow them to share technological and policy solutions to combat desertification and the degradation of lands in all ecosystems.

I am pleased to observe a small but growing number of such initiatives aimed at addressing food insecurity in Africa, Asia and South America. These include a proposal made by the State of Qatar in September 2010 at the 65th session of the UN General Assembly at the Special Side Event on “Global Dry Land Alliance-Partnering for Food Security”. The proposal is for a group of dry land countries to join together to form the “Global Dry Land Alliance”. The innovative solutions and best practices

developed by the Alliance could be shared broadly with dry land countries throughout the world. Another example is the African's Union's "Great Green Wall Initiative", which aims to tackle both environmental and poverty-related challenges and address the effects of land degradation, increasing aridity and desertification in the African Sahara and the Sahel drylands by planting a wall of trees across Africa from Senegal in the east to Djibouti in the west. Initiatives such as these are designed to support and complement efforts towards tangible progress in achieving the MDGs, particularly MDG 1: "Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger".

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Land is life and our life depends on land. We must stop the deadly process of desertification, restore health and vitality to our precious earth and protect the livelihoods of people worldwide. This is your responsibility. This is our responsibility.

Thank you.