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PRESS RELEASE

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON YOUTH AND DESERTIFICATION

Bonn, 12 September - The International Conference on Youth and Desertification, held in Bamako, Mali, from 4-6 September, in the framework of the 2006 International Year of Deserts and Desertification, attracted 150 delegates from 45 countries who had gathered to discuss this pressing issue.

UNCCD Executive Secretary Hama Arba Diallo, describing the Convention's significance for young people, called it "an important instrument capable of transforming the lives of the world's most impoverished people, such as those living in the drylands."

With the majority of young people affected by land degradation living in resource-poor, developing countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, access to proper employment was clearly the main priority. In Africa, the region most affected by desertification, 62% of the population is less than 25 years old. Experts worldwide estimate that current levels of unemployment among the young in West Africa are a ticking time bomb, while in some of the most affected regions, current demographic and urbanization trends are expected to increase dramatically, thereby exacerbating the situation.

The participants approved the "Bamako Statement" calling on governments to ensure full involvement of young people in the management of natural resources and in the decision-making process, and to give priority to creating youth employment as a matter of national urgency. They further agreed to establish a UNCCD Youth Partnership Network in order to facilitate the exchange of information among young people and to ensure that their concerns are brought to the attention of decision makers.

The clear links between desertification, poverty, forced migration and conflicts further illustrated the urgent need for action. With the number of young people leaving their homelands to seek a living in Europe and elsewhere reaching alarming proportions, the participants appealed to developed countries to help curb such forced migration by establishing effective programmes to fight desertification and provide alternative livelihoods, rather than investing in securing their borders.

H.E. Nancoma Keita, Minister of the Environment of Mali, appealed for support in combating desertification "in order to give hope to millions of people suffering its effects and who have no choice but to migrate or to add to the problem through over-exploitation of resources in order to survive."

On the final day of the Conference, six young representatives, one from each region covered by the UNCCD, were received by the President of Mali H.E. Amadou Toumani Touré and briefed him on the outcomes of the meeting.

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