

Don't Desert Drylands!

By : H.E. Mr. Cherif Rahmani

The International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD) is a year of celebration and commemoration: deserts have been the birthplace of ancient cultures and civilizations which are still vibrant yet vulnerable, and which deserve greater tribute.

The Foundation 'Deserts of the world', which has been conferred the privileged status of permanent observer to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, has drawn up a programme of activities to combat desertification in cooperation with the UNCCD Secretariat. Our approach has indeed been focusing more on a programme of activities than celebrations, since the latter needs no further explanation.

The type of activities envisaged has been set out in a wide and varied programme which is unfortunately too long to list here, but which clearly conveys the sense of urgency that underscores the celebrations.

The festive dimension of the Year hasn't therefore completely overshadowed its practical dimension, which involves the adoption and launching of concrete measures in favour of Desert communities. The UN General Assembly Resolution declaring the IYDD invited countries to contribute in whatever way possible, to "the implementation of the Convention and to the launch of special initiatives to celebrate the Year, with the aim of further reinforcing implementation of the convention".

The Resolution further invited all relevant international organizations and Member States to "support activities related to desertification, including soil degradation, to be organized by affected countries, in particular African countries and least developed countries."

Furthermore, the World Environment Day, which is celebrated this year as usual on 5 June, has as its theme the urgent appeal "Don't Desert Drylands!"

The celebration of this Day is a prelude to the commemoration of another significant Day in 2006, which has been uppermost in our minds since the beginning of the year. I am referring to the World Day to Combat Desertification, to be observed this same month, and only twelve days later, on June 17.

My country, Algeria, whose major land mass is made of desert, feels deeply honoured to have been chosen by UNEP to host the World Environment Day. We are, however, convinced that in bestowing this honour on Algeria, it is the whole of Africa to which the international community is paying tribute.

This choice is an acknowledgement by international institutions of the multiple initiatives undertaken by my country in this field over the years, such as the Green Barrier Initiative. Thirty years ago, in a completely innovative approach, Algeria sought to halt the spread of the desert by erecting a vegetal barrier comprising hundreds of thousands of trees.

The Resolution on the Year of Deserts and Desertification comes as a concrete follow-up to the commitments made during the Rio Summit on the Environment and

Development, the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development and the United Nations Summit on the Millennium Development Goals.

As honorary spokesperson for the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, I feel compelled to stress the unique nature and importance of the stakes associated with the IYDD celebrations.

Shouldn't our task be, first and foremost, to give back hope to the millions of people living in arid lands? Shouldn't we in fact be going beyond just hope, as these people are continuously faced with the question of their very survival? The unrelenting hardships they endure should one day be no more than a tale told by future generations when recalling the hard times, long since forgotten, of their parents and grandparents.

From now on, let our motto be: "Don't desert drylands!" Indeed, let's not desert them, neither this year, nor in years to come.

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