

11 December 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the opening of the fourth Session of the Conference of Parties
to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

It is an honour to participate in the opening of the Fourth Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. In my capacity as President of the 55th session of the General Assembly, I should like to reiterate the continued commitment and support of the Assembly to this Convention and to this session.

I wish to express my appreciation also to the Government of Germany, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and the City of Bonn for the warm welcome that has been extended to me. I am convinced that the beautiful banks of the Rhine River and the generous support by the people of this city will contribute towards successful discussions in this Fourth Conference of the Parties of the Desertification Convention.

This Convention has truly become one of the important global legal instruments. Already 171 states have ratified it. As Parties to the Convention, I know you will do your utmost to achieve concrete progress in its implementation. This Convention is important, because it focuses on areas where the balance between the needs of human beings and ecosystems is most delicate and most difficult to achieve, and where the very existence of people is threatened. Dry and semi-dry ecosystems often sustain the poorest of the poor people.

In the Millennium Summit last September, the heads of State and Governments resolved to give priority to eradicate poverty that affects the lives of more than 1.2 billion people. Your work here, in this Fourth Session of the Conference of Parties to the Convention to Combat Desertification touches the very heart of this. Translated into local level, your work serves as a conduit to concrete actions that enable the poor to live within the limits of the carrying capacity of fragile ecosystems. Indeed, the only way to address poverty is through creating sustainable livelihoods and tackling the root causes of poverty - the unequal distribution of productive assets, access to resources, land-ownership and tenure.

The Millennium Summit offered new stewardship for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. It reiterated the validity and importance of the goals of the Convention to Combat Desertification. The Summit gave strong emphasis to the special needs of Africa where poverty and its consequences are most pronounced. In tandem with the Millennium Summit, the Convention also addresses the situation in Africa, where land degradation hits the poorest people most seriously.

Land degradation and loss of soil fertility are great environmental threats - they are very difficult to reverse once they have taken place. Unless effective preventive action is taken, the new millennium faces a true problem of global food insecurity, coupled with an increasing number of refugees, internally displaced people, instability and conflicts.

Co-operation and partnership are keys to practical and wise solutions towards sustainable development. I am encouraged that this Convention is seeking such strategic partnerships that will support its efficient implementation. I am assured that the United Nations family and our other partners stand ready to co-operate. I welcome the decision of the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme to co-operate with the Convention and the fact that UNDP is mainstreaming action against desertification at the national and regional level. I find this decision important. It supports national, sub-regional and regional efforts to alleviate the impact of drought and desertification. In this context, we need to acknowledge the strong commitment by the affected countries in implementing the Convention - we need to support these efforts internationally.

I am also pleased that the other United Nations Conventions, born from the Rio process, are now actively seeking synergies in the area of sustainable management of arid lands within the overall context of global benefits. The recent review of cooperation between the Global Environment Facility and the Rio Conventions was also positive.

These few examples reiterate the fact that this Convention really is about partnerships. It is through partnerships that we will be able to empower the poor to help themselves. I was encouraged to learn that more than thirty National Action Programmes have already been prepared by the affected countries. These programmes involve a variety of partners: the private sector, local communities, women's groups and non-governmental organisations. National Focal Points of the Ministries of Environment or Agriculture have been the driving forces in preparing these programmes. In order for these programmes to be turned into action, and for them to become an integral part of the development plans of the countries concerned, co-operation between different ministries is essential. Only then can full implementation of National Action Programmes be achieved.

We have some homework to do at the international level. The commitment of the developing countries to fulfil their obligations under the Convention should not only be recognized and praised. But their example should galvanize the interest of the international community. Therefore, the National Action Programmes should find their way onto the meeting agendas of the UN, the Bretton Woods Institutions, OECD/DAC and the European Union as well as those of the bilateral donors. The fourth Conference of Parties constitutes an excellent opportunity to show and reiterate our support to those countries and their peoples which are affected by desertification and drought.

I understand that this session has a very demanding agenda before it. In a surprisingly short period of time the Parties have undertaken their obligations and provided National Reports on the implementation of the Convention. The work is impressive: 115 reports from developing

countries together with the 60 reports of donor countries and international organisations. I hope that your rich discussion of these reports will draw valuable lessons for further action.

I wish you every success in your deliberations and decisions.