



Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity



MESSAGE

from

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EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

on the occasion of
WORLD REFUGEE DAY

20 June 2008

Today, as the world focuses on the fundamental need for protection of millions of refugees and displaced people on this World Refugee Day, the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity would like to pay tribute to the courage, strength, and compassion of not only the refugees, but also of those who give them protection. This protection comes in different forms, for some it is economic security and for others it can mean freedom from violence and persecution.

Today, some 40 million people are displaced or refugees, three-quarters of them women and children. The reasons for people fleeing their homes have become increasingly complicated and interlinked. Today people do not just flee persecution and war but also injustice, exclusion, environmental pressures, and competition for scarce resources.

The current food crisis, while not solely caused by decreases in the number of species the world cultivates, is an example of what lays ahead if we continue to allow the loss of agricultural biodiversity despite the predicted global changes in growing conditions. Dramatic rises in crop prices could well become a symptom of the unprecedented loss of agricultural biodiversity and certainly a reflection of its far-reaching impacts on mankind.

It is clear that the relationship between environment and refugees can no longer be overlooked. Environmental problems have contributed to large permanent migrations and have displaced millions of people. Red Cross research shows that more people are now displaced by environmental disasters than by war. It is estimated that some 50 million people worldwide will be displaced by 2010 because of desertification, dried aquifers, rising sea levels, weather-induced flooding and other serious environmental changes.

More than 1.3 billion people depend on fisheries, forest and agriculture for employment. In Africa, seven in ten people live in rural areas, most of whom are engaged in resource-dependent activities such as small-scale agriculture, which accounts for more than 90 per cent of Africa's agricultural production. In fact, agriculture and agricultural biodiversity account for 20 to 60 per cent of national GDP in Africa, with most of this production taking place in dry and sub-humid lands. However, almost half of African dry and sub-humid lands are vulnerable to desertification with climate change expected to further increase this vulnerability by expanding exposure to wind and



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water erosion, prolonged drought and wild fires. Thus, the link between conserving biodiversity and addressing climate change, hunger, poverty reduction and food security is clear.

These conditions are expected to worsen with climate change and will worsen further as the Earth's ability to sustain life is diminished by the ongoing unprecedented loss of biological diversity. In turn, the loss of biodiversity will be compounded by the impact climate change if this is not tackled, and human displacement will increase.

On this World Refugee Day, let us therefore not forget the millions of people who live without material, social and legal protection and are forced to seek a new home and a new life. We must help raise awareness about the plight of refugees, as we cannot protect refugees if their plight remains invisible.

Indeed, protection is a challenge that knows no borders. Let us therefore redouble our efforts to address the root causes of displacement and endeavour to work with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) towards tangible improvements in the lives of forcibly displaced people—from the provision of food and shelter to support for those lacking legal status or those wishing to return to their home countries. To achieve this, we must also renew our commitment to achieve the three objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity and to achieve the 2010 target of significantly reducing the current rate of biodiversity loss.

Montreal, 20 June 2008