

United Nations Secretary-General's remarks to open the meeting of the G-8 Contact Group on food security in Africa

New York, 5 March 2003

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to welcome you to the United Nations for this first meeting of your contact group.

Your focus on food security in Africa comes at a crucial time. The latest food crisis in the continent has brought home to us, more than ever before, the urgent need for a strategy to break the pattern of recurrent crises and bring about a Green Revolution in Africa. But achieving this will require radical approaches on multiple fronts.

Africa has faced food crises in the past; it has faced deadly diseases; it has struggled to come to terms with governance challenges in states with limited capacity and resources.

But rarely has the continent had to face the kind of intersecting challenges we see today. Today, Africa faces a deadly triad of related burdens -- food insecurity, HIV/AIDS and an emaciated capacity to govern and provide services. And this on top of a number of conflicts that are impacting on large parts of the continent.

We cannot find viable solutions to the challenge of food security unless we address the challenges of AIDS and governance at the same time.

Food insecurity in Africa has structural causes. Most African farmers farm small plots of land that do not produce enough to meet the needs of their families. The problem is compounded by the farmers' lack of bargaining power and lack of access to land, finance, and technology.

This further weakens farmers' ability to withstand the impact of recurrent drought and the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Thirty million Africans now live with HIV, and the continent has borne the brunt of more than 20 million AIDS deaths worldwide. In some areas of Africa, more than 40 per cent of the population is HIV-positive, and similar proportions are going hungry.

The devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on food production -- with seven million African farmers already dead -- is only too obvious. And I am sure you will hear a lot more from Jim Morris and Jacques Diouf and others. Infection rates are rising among African women -- who account

for 8 out of 10 of Africa's small farmers, and who traditionally provide the vital coping skills needed in times of food crisis. The latest figures show that women make up 58 percent of Africans already infected.

Because of AIDS, skills and knowledge are dying out rather than being passed from one generation to the next. Both at the household level and the government level, resources are being diverted from food production to health care. In turn, food shortages fuel the disease, through malnutrition, poverty and inequality.

Clearly, breaking this destructive cycle poses a huge challenge to governance. It will require strong institutions, improved skills and innovative policies. But in an irony so typical of the age of AIDS, Africa's ability to govern and to provide services is itself being stretched to breaking point by the disease.

AIDS is decimating the work force, killing the most skilled and productive members of society -- the teachers, the civil servants, the doctors, the scientists. Sector by sector, the loss of human resources is bringing in its wake a governance and development crisis of catastrophic dimensions.

This interlocking set of issues facing Africa is far greater than the sum of its parts. And don't get me wrong, Africa is not affected in the same proportion. There are concentrations in certain countries which I am sure Jim and others will tell you about. Addressing the issue I have raised requires a new, integrated response from both the Governments of Africa and the international community. It requires a shift from short-term approaches to a reassessment of our entire strategy for development -- or, taking long-term measures even when addressing short-term emergencies.

That means we must take the following key actions:

- ❖ Do more to address short-term emergencies and structural causes at the same time -- such as providing food assistance and developing effective approaches to sustainable food security.
- ❖ Do more to prevent HIV infection and treat those already infected, including ensuring access to affordable treatment.
- ❖ Build further on our comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to fighting AIDS; and redouble our efforts to wipe out the stigma and silence that still surround the disease in too many countries.

- ❖ Deliver on the pledge for education for all, including more than 40 million African children who are currently not in school; and ensure that those who are in school -- especially girls -- are not pulled out when drought or HIV strikes the household.
- ❖ Empower Africa's small farmers, for example, by supporting micro-finance -- with a special focus on women, who are both the key food providers and the key to fighting AIDS.
- ❖ Correct the drastic shortfalls in appeals for non-food items in emergency situations. These items, such as support for orphans, education and HIV services, as well as seeds and tools, are crucial to the capacity of communities to recover.
- ❖ Work with rural communities to develop new, labour-saving agricultural and natural resource management technologies, appropriate to a depleted workforce.
- ❖ Reverse the dramatic decline in publicly funded agricultural research, and place a renewed emphasis on science -- particularly soil nutrition, water management and new, higher yielding crops adapted to African conditions. This would include looking at new technologies for a Green Revolution in Africa in an open-minded way, including bio-technology.
- ❖ Develop and support strong African institutions that can connect the world's great and growing store of scientific and technical knowledge directly to the needs of small farmers.
- ❖ Place a strong focus on building critical physical infrastructure -- including transport, support services and irrigation.
- ❖ Build markets that work, and which respond to the needs of Africa's poor, both to maximize revenue and to reduce costs.

Ladies and gentlemen, that list of actions is ambitious. Achieving it will require resources and investment on a new scale -- reversing the alarming decline in development assistance for African agriculture, which dropped from 4 billion dollars to 2.6 billion dollars in the last decade of the 20th century.

You, the richest Governments in the world, are among those best placed to provide those resources. Governments, both North and South, must recognize that agriculture is an essential pillar of development.

But it will also require dismantling the agricultural subsidies from rich countries, which currently total more than 300 billion dollars a year. Only then will Africa be able to achieve truly sustainable agricultural production. President Chirac has opened that issue up for debate, by his call last month for all developed countries to observe a moratorium on subsidizing farm exports destined for Africa.

And finally, to address all these issues, we will need to help African Governments strengthen governance, by rebuilding the capacity of the state to provide essential public services. Where once we spoke of capacity building, today we speak of capacity replenishment.

We can do this only if we are prepared to look at new approaches. In some countries, the crisis may be so acute that the State can function only with short-term support from outside -- through volunteers and additional technical assistance.

But a more systematic, comprehensive and targeted approach will be needed in the months and years to come. It will require working together. And it will be crucial test for the New Partnership for Africa's Development. I hope the Group of Eight will be engaged in the effort. The G-8 Plan of Action for Africa could provide a most useful tool.

The United Nations family is already joining forces to mount the coordinated effort needed. I hope you will work across the board with us, and with the Governments of Africa, in developing the range of revolutionary approaches we need to tackle the deadly triad and break the pattern of food crises in Africa.

I opened my remarks with a message of despair; let me close with one of hope. Yes, this is an unprecedented set of challenges. But your presence here today tells me that we have unprecedented consensus on the need to confront them. Together, we must mobilize the political will to succeed.