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Chairman: Mr. HARLAND (New Zealand)

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AGENDA ITEM 141: COUNTRIES STRICKEN BY DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT

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The meeting was called to order at 10.35 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 141: COUNTRIES STRICKEN BY DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT (A/39/242/Add.1 and A/39/530)

1. Mr. SARRE (Senegal), introducing agenda item 141, said that drought and desertification affected all the world's continents. In sub-Saharan Africa desertification had started in the 1920s and had gradually spread over the continent; it currently affected some 34 countries, threatening more than 150 million people with famine.

2. It was not until the 1970s that the causes and consequences of drought and desertification had begun to be studied in depth. The 1977 United Nations Conference on Desertification in particular had provided a better understanding of the problem and had led to better co-ordination of international efforts under the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification. At present, it was widely recognized that the primary causes of desertification included poor farming practices, indiscriminate deforestation, climatic factors, overgrazing and soil erosion. However, while drought was a climatic contingency, desertification was the result of an imbalance in a dynamic system of interactions involving man, climate, soil and vegetation.

3. He drew attention to the particularly critical situation of the stricken countries which was marked by the collapse of farming as the result of insufficient or non-existent rainfall, by chronic food shortages, by nutritional deficiencies and by uncontrolled migration from the countryside to towns. The situation had been aggravated by rampant urbanization and a population boom. Drought and desertification had also intensified the economic crises besetting the stricken countries. Unemployment had increased and Governments had been forced to draw heavily on their meagre resources, in order to offset sharp drops in export earnings, and to incur external debt in order to meet their development needs.

4. The stricken countries had adopted their own measures and strategies to combat the scourge, but had also recognized that national efforts must be complemented by joint efforts. Consequently, with assistance from the international community, they had organized themselves very early on into subregional and regional zones in order to deal with the effects of drought and desertification. On the initiative of the President of Senegal, a Ministerial Conference had been held in July 1984 at Dakar for the purpose of developing a joint policy for dealing with desertification in the CILSS, ECOWAS and Maghreb Countries and in Egypt and the Sudan. The resolution adopted by the Conference (A/39/530, annex) provided for a global and co-ordinated approach to the problem of desertification.

5. The current situation in the stricken countries indicated that drought and desertification would be a constant that must be taken into account in carrying out development activities in those countries, and both horizontal and vertical co-operation were necessary. The co-operating organizations of the United Nations system - UNSO, ECA, UNDP, UNEP, UNICEF and FAO - must join with all the other

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(Mr. Sarre, Senegal)

specialized agencies and non-governmental organizations co-operating with the United Nations and Governments to alleviate the untold suffering of the millions of victims of drought, hunger and malnutrition.

6. He commended the Secretary-General on his untiring efforts to help the affected developing countries, particularly those in Africa, and to publicize their plight. In the light of the resolution of the Ministerial Conference the international community should take the following action: strengthen existing local and regional institutions in order to support any new co-operative action; consolidate existing subregional programmes; subdivide any new co-operative action into strategic, planning and implementation components; establish and ensure the joint utilization of operational arrangements or facilities; and strengthen the machinery for co-operation, particularly the Trust Fund for Sudano-Sahelian Activities (UNTFSA).

7. Mr. DINKA (Ethiopia) said that the international community was far from achieving the goals set at the Conference on Desertification held at Nairobi in 1977. In fact, it appeared that desertification could not be stopped by the year 2000. Since the Nairobi Conference, 6 million hectares of productive land had been lost through desertification, and an additional 21 million hectares were reduced to zero or negative net economic productivity each year. The number of persons living in areas severely affected by desertification had risen from 57 million to 135 million from 1977 to 1984. Any progress that had been made thus far had been in the area of increasing awareness of the problems involved, as at the Dakar Ministerial Conference, but awareness could not be a substitute for action. Furthermore, the magnitude and scope of the problem necessitated a global response to the problem.

8. Drought and desertification had taken a heavy toll of human and material resources in Africa. In the Sudano-Sahelian region they had crippled socio-economic systems and the ecology of the entire continent. The rapid desertification of vast areas posed a grave threat to the very survival of the African peoples and the carrying capacity of range and pastoral lands had been reduced by 25 per cent. Many African countries whose national economies depended on livestock had lost from 40 to 90 per cent of their herds. In addition, inadequate rainfall had led to severe shortages of water for human consumption, animal husbandry, irrigation and hydro-electric power, seriously upsetting the balance between the human and livestock population and physical resources.

9. If African countries had failed to deal adequately with their staggering environmental problem, it was because of the magnitude and complexity of the problem and it was in acknowledgement of that fact that the stricken countries had submitted their case to the General Assembly. On behalf of the Group of African States, he appealed to the international community to give the issue the serious attention it deserved and to indicate ways in which Member States might provide assistance.

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10. Mr. SAAD (Egypt), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77, said that he hoped that the statements made by the representatives of Senegal and Ethiopia would provide the international community with sufficient motivation for seeking solutions and help it to understand the dimensions of the multi-faceted phenomenon. A comprehensive approach should be adopted, bearing in mind the following factors. First of all, the human dimension in Africa was of particular importance. Secondly, it was clear that the stricken countries were striving valiantly to control drought and desertification within the limits of the resources available to them. Thirdly, while primary responsibility for dealing with the problem lay with the affected countries, the experience and capabilities which they lacked must be made available to them if they were to implement their plans. The relationship between Africa's critical economic situation and its desertification and drought must be borne in mind, particularly in so far as it jeopardized social and economic development efforts. Finally, international co-operation was imperative: the United Nations had an important role to play and bilateral assistance was also fundamental. He therefore called upon the international community to take immediate and effective action for tackling the problem.

11. Mrs. RODRIGUES (Mozambique) said that Africa was facing a gloomy situation in which the severe impact of the international economic crisis had been further aggravated by other factors such as national disasters. Droughts were devastating large areas of the continent, causing disease, malnutrition, famine, starvation and death. The southern region continued to face external destabilization from the apartheid régime, and, since 1980, it had been beset by prolonged droughts which were severely affecting its economic prospects.

12. In Mozambique, the drought was assuming dramatic proportions: about 4.5 million people had been affected, 1.3 million of whom were considered to be starving. The low levels of the streams in the southern part had seriously affected not only the capital, Maputo, but also the outlying agricultural supply zone of the area where 50 per cent of the country's industrial reserves were concentrated. The situation was even more serious in Chokwe, the main area of food supply for the south.

13. There had been a great decrease in the production and distribution of essential goods. Mozambique required an additional \$79 million in foreign exchange, over and above the estimated \$75 million in direct losses it had incurred, to be able to regain even a minimum level of its previous situation.

14. The persisting crisis in the world economy and its devastating impact, together with the adverse effects of natural factors, continued to undermine the economy of Mozambique. Fluctuations in foreign exchange and high interest rates had added to the national debt-service burden.

15. The current crisis experienced by multilateral financial institutions in the matter of resources had resulted in the withdrawal of new allocations, particularly, of long-term credits, disrupting the normal flow of financing for the Mozambique economy. The combined effects of the deterioration in the terms of trade, droughts and destabilization had reduced the country's foreign-exchange

(Mrs. Rodrigues, Mozambique)

income by nearly \$735 million in the three years 1980 to 1983. In spite of valuable aid from the international community, Mozambique had had to divert important resources which could have been used to invigorate its national economy. Moreover, it had incurred a large foreign debt in order to carry out development projects, some of which were in progress.

16. Regular rainfall in September, the Government's support of the family sector of agriculture and the arrival of part of the international aid requested had made it possible to forecast a slight recovery in farm production, but Mozambique still required international aid and urged the international community to seek ways and means enabling countries stricken by desertification and drought to obtain, on a priority basis, the assistance they needed to carry out their development plans and action programmes.

17. Mr. UMAR (Nigeria) said that the severe drought that had begun in 1968 had spread, over the past few years, to many parts of the African continent. Rainfall shortages had been as much as 50 to 60 per cent of normal in some years, resulting in low water tables and reduced stream flow régimes. Apart from being catastrophic for irrigated croplands, abnormally low river levels had disrupted the generation of hydroelectric power for commercial, agricultural and industrial production.

18. The impact of drought on the economies and, in particular, the food situation of the affected African countries had been most severe. Crop production had been substantially reduced in several countries for three years in succession and had led to food shortages. Most of the countries affected were least developed countries, and the effects on them had been particularly severe. Their situation had been further aggravated by the adverse international economic situation.

19. The Scientific Round Table on the Climatic Situation and Drought in Africa, organized by ECA and UNEP in co-sponsorship with other United Nations agencies, had been convened in February 1984 to examine the causes, periodicity, trends and effects of drought on the African economies and to propose measures to be taken in the short, medium, and long terms. The findings of the Round Table indicated that drought was a recurring phenomenon and that its periodicity could not be predicted accurately by cycles or trends. The report of the Round Table however, contained a Regional Plan of Action for dealing with short-, medium- and long-term goals, at the national, regional and global levels, for combating drought.

20. At its twelfth session, the Governing Council of UNEP had reviewed the progress made in implementing the 1977 Plan of Action to Combat Desertification and had concluded that international efforts continued to lag far behind the actions outlined in the Plan. It had therefore declared that the objective of halting desertification by the year 2000 was no longer feasible. Meanwhile, the process of desertification had not abated, and an average of 6 million hectares of land were irretrievably lost each year.

21. Even in the Sudano-Sahelian region, where the impact of desertification had been most pronounced, implementation of the Plan of Action had not fared any

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(Mr. Umar, Nigeria)

better; insufficient financing had remained one of the principal constraints to the effective implementation in that region. Nigeria therefore called upon all donors for greater contributions to the Trust Fund (UNTFSA) and urged the international community to act in a concerted manner to assist the States of the Sudano-Sahelian region.

22. Mr. DJIBRINE (Chad) said that the economic and social crisis besetting Africa had been caused by a persistent drought that had reached alarming proportions and had spread to 35 countries.

23. The situation in Chad was deteriorating day by day and was even worse than that of the great drought of 1973. In the whole region north of the 13th parallel, rainfall had been irregular and inadequate, and desertification had progressed very swiftly. In the Sudano-Sahelian and Sudan regions, there had been a great decrease in rainfall, and the level of Lake Chad had continued to fall.

24. The mass exodus of people and cattle from disaster areas had created food and sanitation problems. Chad's current concern was the resettlement of the displaced. More than 220,000 inhabitants from the north, east and centre had left their regions because of the drought.

25. With the aid of organizations of the United Nations system and many others, Chad was doing its best to tackle the most urgent problems, for example, by setting up refugee centres in large urban areas, distributing food and resettling displaced persons. But the extent of the drought was such that more active efforts were required, involving enormous investments which were beyond Chad's means. Chad's efforts to resettle millions of displaced persons therefore deserved support from the international community.

26. The main effort must come from the countries concerned, either individually or collectively. Most of the countries affected by drought and desertification, including Chad, had taken measures, such as the inauguration of "tree week", during which each citizen was required to plant at least one tree. At the subregional and regional levels, the African States had organized to combat desertification, for example, by establishing the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel. The Scientific Round-Table Meeting on the Climatic Situation and Drought in Africa, held in February 1984 at Addis Ababa, and the Dakar Ministerial Conference of July 1984 were proof of the African States' continuing concern about the destruction caused by drought and desertification.

27. The international community had not been insensitive to the problem, as was apparent from the creation of the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office, the Plan of Action for the Sahel, the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, and the considerable aid provided by countries and organizations for combating the effects of drought and researching means of preventing it.

28. The drought in Africa was no longer a cyclical phenomenon but a daily reality sowing death and devastation. Both national and international efforts were

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(Mr. Djibrine, Chad)

therefore needed to combat the scourge. Such effective support would make it possible not only to counter the immediate effects of drought and desertification but also, over the long term, to protect the African countries from those phenomena.

29. Mr. SANGARE (Mali) said that barely one quarter of Mali was suitable for rain-fed agriculture at all times. It was almost considered normal, in Mali, for water to be in short supply. The current drought had lasted over 10 years and the water table had sunk so low that household and industrial demand was being affected. Eventually, the water balance would be upset and the vegetation destroyed.

30. The basic paradox was that the edge of the desert was not situated at the point where the desert ended but much further south. In between lay semi-arid areas which, because they lacked sufficient water resources, were not inhabited on a permanent basis. The environment, though not very rich, was not overexploited and remained in relatively good condition. Further south, however, the natural environment was somewhat richer, though equally fragile, and had been overexploited for over 30 years because it had water resources. The edge of the desert was made up of a network of arid areas surrounding the water points and inhabited areas. In Mali, it had moved between 50 and 100 kilometres during the past decade.

31. Mali's national strategy for countering desertification gave priority to, inter alia, reafforestation at the village level, brushfire control, food self-sufficiency and judicious use of water and pastures. As a result, brushfires had been banned entirely, sectoral development policies had been formulated integrating agricultural, forestry and livestock development, competitions and bonuses had been introduced to promote desertification control and master plans for regional development had been drawn up.

32. Desertification was not irreversible, but countries did not necessarily have the means to combat desertification on their own. Governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations had helped Mali greatly, as had the Sudano-Sahelian Office and he appealed urgently for increased contributions to the latter.

33. Mr. TEP (Democratic Kampuchea) said that little progress had been made in implementing the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification; 34 countries were now affected.

34. The African countries needed more international assistance - not only food and financial resources but also scientific and technological resources - for the short, medium and long term. He welcomed the initiatives taken by the Secretary-General to draw attention to the critical situation and the efforts made by the United Nations system to support the efforts of the affected countries.

35. Mr. ZHANG Yesui (People's Republic of China) said that it was encouraging that, in the current serious situation, a number of African countries and the international community had taken steps to combat the consequences of drought. The

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(Mr. Zhang Yesui, People's Republic
of China)

regional Plan of Action, adopted at the Scientific Round Table on the Climatic Situation and Drought in Africa held at Addis Ababa, and the recent decision of six African countries to establish an intergovernmental body to combat the effects of drought clearly demonstrated the determination of the African countries to rely on their own initiatives. However, such efforts must be complemented by general support and co-operation on the part of the international community.

36. He regretted that there had not been greater progress with regard to concrete action against desertification and to the mobilization of funds, but the decision of the recent Dakar Conference that there should be more efficient and systematic co-operation at all levels was an important step and should be backed up by constructive international assistance to Africa.

37. Mr. DJOUDI (Algeria) emphasized the importance of the recent Ministerial Conference which had, inter alia, drawn up a joint strategy for combating desertification.

38. The repeated postponement of the implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification was indicative not only of the dimension of the problem but also of the inadequacy of the means allocated for that purpose. As a result, not only had the list of affected countries grown but, as the World Bank had recently pointed out, the drought might eventually jeopardize the crops on which many countries relied for their foreign-exchange earnings and the rebuilding of their livestock. The eradication of hunger, the achievement of health for all, and drought and desertification control were interdependent, and any further delay would have incalculable repercussions. Short-, medium- and long-term action was therefore urgently needed.

39. Algeria had embarked on a major enterprise to halt the advance of the desert: the "green dam" project - covering over 3 million hectares - was designed to promote the integrated development of the Algerian steppes.

40. Reforestation measures and steps to combat erosion and desertification could have a positive impact only if they were carried out as part of an integrated economic and social development process designed to benefit the people themselves. Such measures called, inter alia, for the harnessing of water resources, development of alternate sources of energy so as to conserve vegetation, and the achievement of food security, in all of which the people must participate fully.

41. The affected countries and the international community should concentrate on co-operating in such areas as the training and exchange of experts and technicians; studies and scientific research; the establishment of a mapping service and a measurement and observation network; more information exchanges; and the development of water resources. These activities should be fully supported by the relevant organizations of the United Nations system so as to provide renewed impetus in the campaign to combat desertification.

42. Mr. ZOLLER (Australia) said that Australia, as the driest continent in the world, had first-hand experience of drought and desertification and therefore welcomed the focusing of international attention on those problems. It had approached its own drought problem in several ways. Underground water had been tapped, by using inexpensive techniques such as wind power and simple irrigation methods that might be applied in other drought-stricken areas. On a more ambitious level, Australia's experience in diverting the course of a river was being shared with many developing countries. Another approach was the development of more drought-resistant crops and livestock. Australia would willingly share its experiences and successes in farming previously unusable dry areas.

43. Though it could not always be stopped, the process of desertification could be slowed down by such means as educating land users as to the dangers of inappropriate agricultural techniques and by afforestation projects, in which area Australia was making its expertise available to other countries. The drought-prevention measures listed in the report of the Dakar Conference, as being essential to the strategy to halt drought and desertification accorded with Australia's own experience. His country was prepared to help in providing assistance and expertise to other countries less fortunate than Australia in coping with their problems.

44. The human tragedies involved, to which the representatives of Senegal and Ethiopia had referred, must not be forgotten. Long-term developments to avoid drought disasters was the ultimate objective, but a quick response by the international community was necessary. As a major food donor, Australia was responding promptly to calls for emergency assistance.

45. Mr. BORNA (Director, United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office), speaking both as Director of the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO) and as Special Adviser to the Administrator of UNDP on drought and desertification, said that the Dakar Conference had been a complete success. To assist in decision-making, he had prepared a list of stricken countries, which was available to delegations, on the basis of the Desertification Map of the World prepared for the United Nations Conference on Desertification and on recent records of drought, especially in Africa. He had used the criteria of drought defined by WMO as resulting from an extended period of below-average precipitation and having severe adverse effects on agriculture. According to UNSO's preliminary estimates, 74 countries would classify as stricken by desertification and drought, if that definition were used.

46. He emphasized the close relationship between drought and desertification. The Conference on Desertification had defined desertification as a process of degradation of fragile ecosystems found in arid, semi-arid and sub-humid lands. Arid climates had both low and variable rainfalls which resulted in frequent droughts, and accelerated desertification in the absence of the necessary countermeasures. The drought in the Sudano-Sahelian region had persisted in varying degrees for 16 years, with short respites and disastrous intensifications. It had even extended to forested regions of Africa, assuming the proportions of a continental drought.

(Mr. Borna)

47. The countries listed as stricken by desertification and drought varied in their capacity to combat the scourge, depending on their natural resources and economic development. Certain countries on the list, including the majority of the countries of the Sahel, were classified as being among the least developed countries and were suffering extreme deprivation.

48. The classification drawn up did not take into account the extent to which each country on the list was affected; some of them were affected only to a small extent. It might be that only countries the majority of whose territory was susceptible to drought and whose economies were adversely affected to a large degree should be included on the list. Those were factors that could be considered in greater depths by the Committee.

The meeting rose at 12.50 p.m.