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A Voice From Africa

28 By Abdou Diouf

For more than a decade, sub-Saharan Africa has been witnessing unparalleled catastrophes and natural disasters.

Africa is a victim of drought and famine directly affecting more than one-tenth of its population, as well as of epidemics with a high fatality rate and of a disturbing shortage of water resources. It is experiencing an involuntary mass exodus of people which has never been equalled — some 8 to 10 million uprooted according to the official figures for 1984, and this includes only the refugees living in camps organized by the international community and the host countries.

Living conditions in Africa south of the Sahara are of the hardest, and are becoming more severe from day to day because of the inadequacy of primary resources or the ineffectiveness with which they are exploited. Thus one of the most intractable problems which the countries of the Sudano-Sahelian region have to face is the persistence of the continual threat constituted by a drought and desertification, with their correlaries of destruction of natural resources and agricultural land and social and political disturbances.

The problem of desertification in Africa has existed for a very considerable time, but it was brought vividly to the attention of the entire world by the impacts of the drought which prevailed towards the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s in the western part of the Sahel, and subsequently extended eastwards to the Sudan and the Horn of Africa. The United Nations Conference on Desertification, held in Nairobi in 1977, brought about a more acute awareness of the problem. A Plan of Action to Combat Desertification was approved at the conference and, at the end of that year, by the United Nations General

Assembly. The 19 countries of the African region most severely affected may be categorized as follows:

- In 13 countries of the region, 75 percent of the land area is in arid and semi-arid climatic zones;
- Fifteen countries are experiencing growing desertification problems;
- Fourteen of these countries belong to the category of least-developed countries, according to the United Nations;
- In 18 countries of the region, the balance of payments situation is constantly deteriorating or other exchange-related problems have to be contended with;
- Nine countries have again been faced (since 1982) with problems resulting from a new period of drought or a resurgence of the drought;
- In demographic terms, the region — like the rest of Africa south of the Sahara — is experiencing a high population growth rate.

Extrapolating from data provided by the World Bank and the United Nations, it may be calculated that the total populations of the countries in the Sudano-Sahelian region has increased by 45 million (or 23 percent) during the period under consideration, rising from a little more than 190 million in 1971 to 236 million in 1984. If this rate of increase is maintained, the region's total population will reach more than 400 million by the year 2000, according to World Bank figures. Taking these projections into account, the countries of East Africa, including the Horn of Africa, have experienced the most pronounced growth from 1977 to 1984. To this must be added a particularly difficult and persistent problem attributable to political disturbances as well as to natural disasters such as drought: this is the existence in most countries of groups of political and eco-

nomical refugees, which imposes on the host countries a considerable burden.

The foregoing remarks present a picture of the global context that serves as the background to [the October symposium at Howard] which has the merit of setting itself a number of basic objectives that include:

- Greater dissemination of understanding of the problem of drought and desertification;
- Better media coverage of the causes and consequences of drought and desertification; and
- Encouragement to greater mobilization of resources to combat drought and halt the process of desertification in order to rehabilitate and develop the afflicted countries.

The action taken by the international community following last year's poor harvest is commendable. The sufferings of the seven million famine-stricken Ethiopians drew the attention of the whole world; but there are, equally, the sufferings of millions upon millions of Africans throughout the continent. This famine is the worst Africa has known for a very long time. The international community, both individuals and governments, responded to this disaster with generosity. Much still remains to be done to ensure that the food reaches those who need it in time, and it is essential that sufficient flow of aid should be kept up. In this respect, we must acknowledge the initiative taken by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in establishing the Office for Emergency Operations in Africa.

The latest information compiled by the Office for Emergency Operations in Africa has confirmed that many parts of Africa are threatened by an unprecedented crisis which shows no prospect of abating in the foreseeable future, even if the conditions resulting from the drought were to im-

prove substantially after this year's rainy season.

The governments of the countries of the Sudano-Sahelian region, for their part, are aware that their essentially agricultural and pastoral economies depend on the rains, and that climatic variations present a serious obstacle to national development and the survival of their peoples. The droughts which occurred during the 1970s and the response of the international community on that occasion helped focus government attention on the problem, and gave rise to an awareness which is reflected today in the political will of subregional groups of states to combat drought and desertification.

In the Sahelian region of West and Central Africa, the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) was established in 1973 to bring together within a single governmental body a number of the countries most affected by drought (Chad, the Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Upper Volta — now Burkina Faso — and Cape Verde) so as to draw the attention of the international community to the devastation caused by the drought and coordinate the efforts of donors.

In 1976, the "Club du Sahel" was established for the purpose of coordinating the long-term policies and strategies of donors and CILSS member states. The Club, so called because of the flexibility with which it operates, acts among donor countries to make them aware of the CILSS countries' needs, thus helping to increase the flow of resources required in order to meet the Sahel's development needs in the field of improving transport and communications as well as productivity (stock-raising and agriculture).

In 1977, CILSS, with the support of [a number of U.N. agencies] and international donors, established the "Institut du Sahel" to coordinate and harmonize scien-

tific research carried out in the countries of the region and provide training for researchers and technicians.

In East Africa, a commendable effort has recently been made by six countries of the Horn of Africa to harmonize their efforts in combating drought, desertification and underdevelopment by establishing a subregional cooperation body, with headquarters in Djibouti, known as the Inter-governmental Authority for Drought and Development. The members are Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti.

Southern Africa, which I recently travelled through, is also making appropriate arrangements, and its praiseworthy efforts must be followed up and supported with understanding and generosity in the special context of the evils inflicted by *apartheid*, which is the cancer of our continent.

At the continent-wide level, African governments acting within the framework of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) have set forth priority policies in the Lagos Plan of Action which has recently been reactivated by the latest OAU summit. The African heads of states assigned to the OAU and ECA secretariats responsibility for implementing the Lagos Plan, in which governments have begun cooperating with a view to achieving development objectives by the year 2000, particularly self-sufficiency in food production and supply, the preservation, protection and improvement of the natural environment and the rational utilization of natural resources.

In July 1984, Dakar was the scene of a regional interministerial conference on desertification (which I presided over) attended by representatives from 22 countries, north and south of the Sahara. The 1984 conference, which had a particular impact at the level of the international

community, was to be followed by a second session (November 1985) in Dakar, with ministerial-level participation from 25 countries, to draw up a common platform for combating desertification.

The problems caused by the drought are indeed the most immediate ones, but the problems of food production and long-term development are equally serious and urgent. Combating drought and desertification is a long-term enterprise. While emergency aid can help ease the misery of the afflicted peoples and alleviate their suffering, the fact remains that the true solutions to the serious problems the countries afflicted by drought and desertification are facing are medium-term and long-term solutions.

Africa, for its part, is gearing itself to the task of finding solutions, and will give of its best to fulfill the challenge, but the international community will still have to meet the hopes Africa places on it.

Problems which date back more than 10 years cannot be solved from one day to the next; African governments, bilateral and multilateral donors and non-governmental organizations will have to persevere in their efforts to improve the economic climate, overcome the impact of the drought and restart growth. If we do not bring all our attention to bear on these problems, and on the other fundamental problems of development, the sacrifices which the recovery programs being undertaken in Africa entail will be in vain. □

The above was excerpted from remarks by the President of Senegal and chairman of the Organization of African Unity at the International Symposium on Drought and Desertification at Howard University.