

17 June 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,  
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,  
on World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought**

Each year 17 June is marked as the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought. Commemorating this day provides an occasion to underline the seriousness of global land degradation. Although this World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought has a tradition of less than a decade, the fight against droughts and famine is one of the oldest and still remains one of the most important issues on the agenda of the United Nations, in particular because it is both a cause and a consequence of poverty among the rural masses.

Desertification and drought pose major problems for millions of people across many continents of the world. We live in a world where drylands make up a big percentage of the world's land surface and desertification affects the lives of one sixth of the world's already impoverished populations living in dryland areas. Worldwide, the loss of potential productivity due to soil erosion is estimated as equivalent to some 20 millions tons of grain per year. Millions of hectares of productive land are lost every year due to land degradation negatively affecting the agricultural and fisheries sectors and reducing the world's fresh water supplies and biological resources.

We all know that desertification is caused by several factors of which two are identified as the most important - climate variability and human activities. Climatic events like El Nino have resulted in serious drought situations in parts of South America, Africa, Asia, Australia and North America. Today drylands on almost every continent are being further degraded by over cultivation, overgrazing and poor irrigation practices. Soil is further lost through unsustainable land use practices, industrial and agro-industrial pollution, infrastructure development and urbanization in developed and developing countries. Degraded land is causing downstream flooding, reduced water quality, silting of reservoirs and many other problems.

The United Nations continues to play a major role in promoting and implementation of the conventions relating to sustainable development including the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification that was adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. As of June 2003, a total of 187 countries have ratified and or acceded to this Convention to Combat Desertification This is a legally binding framework providing a comprehensive answer to problems related to the environment and sustainable livelihoods. It offers a unique framework for facing the double challenges for reducing poverty and desertification.

Desertification is in some countries or regions at the very basis of political and socio-economic problems and poses a threat to the environmental equilibrium. We all depend on the capacity of our planet's land to accommodate our needs. Therefore the importance of this international day is

evident and we pay tribute to those who have actively participated in focusing the world's attention on environmental issues.