

28 May 2008

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Srgjan Kerim,
President of the 62nd Session of the General Assembly,
at the Opening of the Ministerial Segment of the 9th Meeting of the
Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity**

Madam Chancellor,

Mr. Prime Minister,

Mr. President of the European Commission,

Mr. President,

Distinguished Ministers,

Excellencies,

May I, on behalf of the United Nations family, warmly welcome you to the ministerial segment of this important conference. I am enormously happy to be back in Bonn, where I spent several wonderful years as ambassador of my country. Today I know it to be a true center of environmental sustainability. I am also glad to see that many United Nation Funds, Programs and Agencies are participating in the conference.

Excellencies,

I recently visited the Museum of Natural History in New York. The sheer number of animals and habitats exhibited there is breathtaking. At the same time the designation of many species as “endangered” or even “extinct” is deeply troubling. And this is of course only the tip of the iceberg because less prominent species and sub-species are not even exhibited. The world is facing an unprecedented loss of biodiversity. We all know the facts. Extinction rates have been estimated to be as much as 1,000 times higher than the typical natural rates over the Earth's history – before human civilization.

Every hour four species or sub-species are lost. Every minute 20 hectares of forests disappear; every year 13 million hectares are destroyed— to put this into perspective imagine an area four times the size of Belgium.

Although only 7 per cent of the world's surface, tropical forests provide habitat for 50 to 70 per cent of all identified living species. They are also the richest areas in cultural biodiversity. 1,400 to 2,500 different indigenous populations or 54% of the world's ethnicities live in or make their livelihood from tropical forests.

Excellencies,

Nature's resources, which so many of us take for granted, are the result of intricate interactions, over millions of years, of millions of species that make up the Earth's modern biodiversity. The sustainable use of this biodiversity is the primary goal of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the foundation for environmental sustainability. And yet, we are destroying our biodiversity at a faster rate than at any other period in human history. Unless we take urgent action, this trend will not be reversed, it will only accelerate.

By undermining global biodiversity, we undermine sustainable development - both of which are being exacerbated by changing climatic conditions - a hitherto unprecedented environmental challenge.

Because of the interconnected web of all life on earth degradation in one area limits progress in others. The converse is also true: improvements in one area support progress in others. The vast majority of scientific evidence demonstrated that robust biodiversity and healthy ecosystems not only help mitigate climate change, they also help support rural livelihoods. Indeed, natural capital constitutes 26 per cent of the capital wealth of low-income countries.

If we therefore conserve biodiversity, we preserve our chances of developing sustainable and of living healthy lives even as the climate changes.

Excellencies,

In April 2002, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) committed themselves to achieve, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national levels, both, as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on Earth. This target was subsequently endorsed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the United Nations General Assembly. In doing so the international community endorsed the crucial link between of biodiversity preservation and human well-being.

The 2010 target to reduce biodiversity loss has subsequently been integrated into the Millennium Development Goals. However, achieving it presents a truly global challenge as we have less than two years. Can and will the target be met?

There are unarguably a number of success stories from which we can draw inspiration. I understand that protected area coverage has doubled over the past 20 years and that terrestrial protected areas now cover over 12% of the Earth's landmass. Similarly there has been a marked improvement in the water quality of rivers in Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean since the 1980s.

However, these remain local achievements. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, unprecedented additional efforts would be needed to achieve, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss at all levels. Indeed, out of the 24 ecosystems services assessed by the

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 15 are in decline, including the provision of freshwater, the ability of the atmosphere to cleanse itself from pollutants and the number and quality of places of spiritual and religious value.

Climate change is further exacerbating biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystems already weakened by other drivers of change such as pollution, land-use change, invasive species and over-exploitation. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, approximately 20 to 30% of plant and animal species assessed so far are likely to be at increased risk of extinction if increases in global average temperature exceed 1.5-2.5oC. That is why the fight against climate change is also a fight for biodiversity. Minister Gabriel is right when he declared that protecting nature is also about climate protection and vice versa.

Excellencies,

The celebration of 2010 as the International Year for Biodiversity will provide a unique opportunity for stocktaking and assessment on how far we were able to collectively achieve the 2010 target and at the same time will enable us to chart a way forward for the post 2010 phase. In this context I support the call to convene, at its sixty fifth session, in 2010, and as a contribution to the International Year for Biodiversity, a one-day high-level segment of the General Assembly, with participation of Heads of State and Government. This will enable the international community to focus global attention on the biodiversity crisis and impart the necessary high-level political guidance and will to chart the way forward.

We have seen in various instances that leadership at the highest level is required to move issues forward. The support galvanized in September 2007 ahead of the Bali climate conference is a good example. Germany and especially both of you personally, Madam Chancellor and Mr. President, has shown that kind of leadership to build an alliance of leadership for nature. I also commend the Executive Secretary of the Convention, Dr. Ahmed Djoglaf, and his team for their exceptional efforts in making this conference a success. I am sure Japan as next President of the COP will continue this work in the right spirit at the highest level.

So, let me conclude, by wishing you constructive discussions and ambitious decisions so that together we can fulfill the high expectations of the public in the days ahead.

I thank you.