

# Cherif Rahmani: Don't Desert Drylands

This slogan, in the form of an urgent call to action, defines the context in which World Environment Day 2006 will be celebrated. Algeria, my country, is honoured to have been chosen by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as host of this day. Algeria is doubly honoured, first and foremost because the majority of its territory comprises desert and also because, by choosing Algeria, it is the whole of Africa that is honoured.

This year, the theme builds on Resolution 58/211 under which the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 2006 International Year of Deserts and Desertification. This decision represents a welcome outcome of the multifaceted steps taken by my country on deserts, initiated and developed for many years, but that has certainly experienced a revival since the year 2000.

Many efforts, many initiatives and many plans of action have thus been successful. Algeria has committed itself, resolutely and consistently, to policies that not only mobilize but unify as well. Under the innovative environmental policies initiated by His Excellency Abdelaziz Bouteflika, President of the Republic, we have developed and conclusively and visibly expanded on the commitments made during the Summits on the Environment and Sustainable Development of Rio then Johannesburg, as well as the UN's Summit on the Millennium Development Goals. We have also tried, and often succeeded, at our level, to encourage partnerships and mediums of cooperation and dialogue at a regional and international level, while always ensuring that our approach respected common principles, such as those pertaining to "shared but differentiated responsibility". Should one not therefore, consider that by choosing Algeria as the focal point for the celebrations in 2006, the aspirations and very valid expectations awakened by the UN Resolution declaring this the International Year of Deserts and Desertification to have been consecrated?

It is in any case justifiable that we once again declare ourselves honoured by this selection, in as much as the Resolution was adopted following the initiative taken by my country and that of the Fondation Déserts du Monde created under the patronage of H. E. Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

I have the pleasure and the privilege to reaffirm here, in my capacity of Ambassador, Honorary Spokesperson of the UN for the 2006 commemoration, how seriously we take the demands of the mission we have been given.

We must first give back hope to the millions of people in drylands. Hope alone, however, can not satisfy expectations when survival is often the prime issue. We not only feel concern at the often chronic material poverty in which entire communities are sinking in desert and semidesert regions.

Their poverty is, in our view, the supreme issue. And it is there that we draw on the reasons for our actions and our commitment. Algeria will host a high level meeting at the end of the year, in the context of the International Year on Deserts and Desertification. The meeting will take stock of all that was warmly and generously thought of and retained concerning deserts and its people. This will be the crowning achievement, not only suggested but also programmed, of a series of actions throughout the months that make up this symbolic year. The fight against desertification is an unending one. The fight against poverty is an imperative one, which now categorically forces itself upon us.

So what territory in reality is touched by our action? It is obviously the planet as a whole. For, if deserts only appear here and there in man's view, the heart of human sensitivity, on the other hand, resides everywhere.

We must speak up everywhere in favour of the deserts and the populations that inhabit them and that have formed such extraordinary civilizations, such extraordinary cultures!

We must sensitize man everywhere because where man's heart and spirit are conquered, they put themselves at the service of the causes that have moved them positively.

Let us always remember that we are at the service of one slogan: Don't desert drylands! Because that slogan puts us at the service of those who, though possibly unaware of our efforts, nonetheless and paradoxically, expect much from us ■

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