

## **Seizing the chance**

By Hristo Stoitchkov \*

It may strike some people as strange that a footballer is getting involved with the subject of desertification, especially one from Bulgaria, a country not instantly associated with the problem. Let me explain. In the course of my football career, I had the opportunity to play regularly in countries such as Spain, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the United States, all of which are affected directly or indirectly by desertification. I have therefore seen with my own eyes some of the consequences associated with it and personally recognize the need for action.

Many people, especially in countries not directly affected, may only have a vague understanding of desertification and do not realize the full scale of the problem. The IYDD is a golden chance to increase awareness of this urgent issue all around the world. My aim is to reach out, in particular, to young people. I'm especially concerned about the impact desertification has on the youth in affected countries, many of whom suffer hunger and malnutrition and face a life of poverty and insecurity.

But what can be done to make people of all ages sit up and take notice? It is an unfortunate fact that desertification does not always receive the attention it deserves. Football, in contrast, is a subject which receives unparalleled attention from both the public and the media. By coincidence, 2006 happens to be not only the IYDD, but also sees the staging of the World Football Championships in Germany, the seat of the UNCCD Secretariat.

This is where the world's favourite game comes in. Just as football unites the world and is enjoyed by all, old and young, rich and poor, indeed male and female, we can get the message across that desertification affects us all too, and that we have a responsibility to do something about it. In this regard, as part of the Year's celebrations, I'm looking forward to organizing a major football match between players from different European countries as well as prominent footballers from countries affected by desertification, particularly from Africa.

Football is a tough, competitive game and to be successful requires not only skill, but even more importantly, fighting spirit and a determination to win. My hope is that I can call on this experience to drive the message home that we cannot and must not be indifferent to the problem and consequences of desertification. Whether through the medium of football or any of the other multitude of events taking place during the Year, I hope that the issue of desertification will touch the hearts and minds of many people and that they will respond by becoming involved in projects and activities to combat it.

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