

**STATEMENT**  
**of**  
**AHMED DJOHLAF**  
**EXECUTIVE SECRETARY**  
**at the**  
**OPENING SESSION**  
**of the**  
**NINTH MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES**  
**TO THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**  
**Bonn, 19 May 2008**

Ladies and Gentlemen

Last month while visiting St John in Antigua and Barbuda, I learned about a poem that schoolchildren throughout the Caribbean region are taught:

*June – too soon.*  
*July – stand by!*  
*August – look out you must.*  
*September – remember.*  
*October – all over.*

This saying stems from local knowledge about the hurricane season built up over centuries—knowledge that has withstood the test of time and enabled communities to survive and flourish. However, this saying may very soon lose its wisdom. Last year the United Nations launched 13 appeals for humanitarian assistance, breaking a record. Twelve of them were climate-related disasters. Last March, unusually large waves reaching as high as 30 feet, lashed coastlines from Guyana to the Dominican Republic causing serious damage to coral reefs across the region. Indeed, while providing fertile fishing grounds, and protection from storms, coral reefs are among the most vulnerable ecosystems on Earth.

To raise awareness of their tremendous value and fragility, the international community is celebrating, this year, the International Year of the Reef. Twenty per cent of coral reefs have been destroyed worldwide. Twenty-four per cent are in imminent danger, and a further 26 per cent are threatened over the longer term. Even the disappearance of sharks is affecting coral reefs, and the dramatic decline in shark populations is affecting the stability of the entire marine system.

Some areas of the world have recently seen a decline of up to ninety-nine per cent in some large-shark populations. As a result the population of their prey is expanding dramatically, which in turn results in a depletion of populations lower on the food chain. Carnivorous groupers feed on algae-grazing parrotfish. With fewer parrotfish, algae growth is increasing the stress on coral reefs. Indeed, sharks are an essential element for the health of coral ecosystems.

The loss of 73 million sharks is not only affecting coral ecosystems, but is also leading to the devastation of shellfish populations, which play a major role in water filtration by reducing sediments and improving water quality. The rapid decline of large sharks in the world's oceans is leading to an increase in the number of shellfish predators, thus disrupting marine ecosystems as a whole. The fact is that every species has a role to play and its disappearance disturbs its ecosystem. This is what the web of life is about.

Albert Einstein once noted that, *“We still do not know one thousandth of one per cent of what nature has revealed to us.”* In spite of unprecedented scientific discoveries and technological advances, we human beings still have much to learn from Nature. All life on Earth is interconnected. Species cannot survive without their natural habitat and, in turn, the latter is being impacted by their disappearance.

In Kenya, fences were erected around acacia trees to keep away giraffes and elephants, in the belief that this would allow the trees to thrive. This severed a vital symbiotic relationship. Without herbivores, the trees produce fewer thorns. With fewer thorns and less sap, ants move on to other trees, giving way to wood-boring beetles that invade the tree. Instead of protecting the acacia trees, the fences isolated them from nature, increasing their vulnerability. Conservation of biodiversity is not about keeping one species away from another. *It is not about building fences around national parks and keeping humans out. It is about interaction between all species and their natural ecosystem.* It is about **ONE NATURE**.

Every species is a vital piece in the complex puzzle of the life web of our planet. Interlinkages are what keep the puzzle glued together—for the planet to function. E.O. Wilson pointed out that, *If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos.*

About two thirds of the food crops that feed the world rely on pollination by insects or other animals to produce healthy fruits and seeds. Included among these are potato crops. Here in Germany, there has been a 25 per cent drop in bee populations across the country. In the eastern United States, bee stocks have declined by 70 per cent. If pollinators disappear, so too will many species of plants. If we take away one link, the chain is broken.

As Albert Einstein once said, *If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would only have four years of life left. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man.* The unfolding global food crisis sounds like a wake-up call to the serious consequences of human activities on the ability of our planet to continue sustaining life on Earth. The dramatic rise in crop prices is a symptom of the unprecedented loss of agricultural biodiversity and certainly a reflection of its far-reaching impacts on humankind. To minimize the impact of the food crisis in Bangladesh, people have been recently encouraged to eat more potatoes than rice.

As we also celebrate the International Year of the Potato this year, it is worth noting that potatoes are also a grim reminder of the need to maintain genetic diversity in our staple food crops. History has shown that relying on only a few varieties can lead to disaster, as seen in Ireland in the 1840s when potato blight resulted in the starvation of one million people and forced another one million to emigrate to Britain or North America.

The potato represents the importance of an ecosystem approach, advocated by your Convention, the convention on life on Earth. Indeed, all parts of an ecosystem play a part in ensuring a healthy potato crop. Potatoes represent the intricate interlinkages of species and mutualism that exists in nature.

As Felix Mendelssohn once noted, *the essence of beautiful is unity in variety.* This remark captures one of the most fundamental and vital, yet vulnerable, aspects of the natural world: the interconnectedness of its different species and ecosystems makes it unique, special and irreplaceable. These interactions, which have developed over millennia of evolution, are without doubt irreplaceable. However this web of life is under threat—and we are the largest culprit.

Impacts on the natural functions of our planet have never been as destructive as in the last 50 years. Over the past hundred years humans, have increased species-extinction rates by as much as 1,000 times the typical background rates over Earth's history, as inferred from the fossil record. Last week, WWF released its Living Planet Index, a unique measure of the state of the world's biodiversity. It tracks nearly 4,000 populations and shows a frightening overall decline of 27 per cent; populations of tropical terrestrial species appear to have declined by

46 per cent. As we all know 80 per cent of the biodiversity of our planet is located in tropical forests. The report also confirmed that humanity's total footprint exceeded the productive capacity of the biosphere by 25 per cent, and its rate of growth showed no sign of diminishing. The cost has been evaluated by the lead author of the study *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity*, Mr. Pavan Sukhdev, at 3.1 trillion dollars a year or 6% of overall gross national product. As always, the poorest are bearing the brunt of the cost.

Therefore, addressing the planetary challenge of biodiversity loss compounded by climate change requires renewed international cooperation and the full engagement of all stakeholders. Since the last meeting in Curitiba, the world's biodiversity family has been joined by Timor Leste and Montenegro. They are attending our meeting for the first time as Parties. We have also been joined today by Brunei Darussalam. I would like to welcome the three new Parties to the biodiversity family.

The recent cyclone Nargis, which devastated Myanmar, brings back memories of the horror of the 2004 tsunami, as well as hurricane Katrina. With the recent deadly tornados in Arkansas and Oklahoma, this year is on pace to see the most deaths from tornados in the United States since 1998. The severity and the frequency of the 1,270 tornados a year in the United States are a reminder that not a single country is immune from the devastating effects of the deterioration of our environment.

What is lost in one country is lost to the world. The United States needs the CBD family just as the CBD family needs them and the other three remaining countries that have yet to become parties to the Convention. It is my sincere hope that by 2010 we shall celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity as a united universal biodiversity family comprising all members of the international community of nations, without any exception. Because we are all part of the web of life, each country, small or big, developed or developing, North or South, East or West, has a vested interest in ensuring the implementation of the three objectives of the Convention on life on Earth. Indeed, we are One World.

As Einstein once pointed out, *“We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”* In Curitiba, a new phase of enhanced implementation of the three objectives of the Convention was born. Let me pay tribute to Brazil and to Marina Silva, in particular, for her leadership and the new thinking that steered the work of the Convention for the last two years. Muito Obrigado

The enhanced phase of implementation of the Convention calls for the active engagement of all stakeholders alike. The establishment of a universal global alliance for protecting life on Earth is urgently required. This is about Our Future. Our future starts today. At the closure of our meeting, we will have less than 579 days left to fulfil the promise made by Heads of State and Government in Johannesburg to substantially reduce the loss of biodiversity by 2010. We also have less than two years left to fulfil the Curitiba commitment to adopt an international regime on access and benefit sharing.

The challenge ahead is truly daunting and calls for exceptional efforts.

As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said, *“Fresh activity is the only means of overcoming adversity.”* For an exceptional meeting, the Convention has found an exceptional host and leader promoting fresh activities. For an exceptional meeting, the ninth meeting of the Conference of the Parties is hosted by the people and Government of Germany, who have demonstrated their commitment to achieving the three objectives of the Convention.

From the expert meeting held in Potsdam in December 2006, to yesterday's Naturathlon, Germany has demonstrated that hosting a biodiversity meeting means not only providing conference facilities but also involving an entire nation: Government and people.

Through its unique biodiversity campaign, our host has shown that to win the battle for life on Earth you need to win the heart of the citizens of the world. Last month, the Secretariat received 130 Google alerts on articles published in Germany on biodiversity. Over the last two weeks, more than 100 articles on biodiversity have been published in major German national and local newspapers and magazines. As a result biodiversity was in the headlines of the International Herald Tribune and on page one of the latest issue of Die Zeit, one of the most read German weekly news magazines. Through the organization of more than 200 COP-related events, Germany has shown the way ahead. Through its triple presidency of the G8, the European Union and this meeting, Germany has demonstrated that hosting a meeting of the biodiversity family is a matter of providing leadership and vision as well as setting the example. President Köhler, Chancellor Merkel, Ministers Gabriel and Seehofer, Mr. Jochen Flasbarth, Lady Mayor Dieckmann, every citizen of Germany, I thank you whole-heartedly for your efforts. Vielen Dank!

Half measures and business-as-usual are no longer options when it comes to the unprecedented environmental challenges that the world faces today. The biodiversity family is called upon to meet our host's national initiative, to make Bonn the United Nations city for sustainable development a global and universal *\_Globale Naturallianz*.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Albert Einstein also said, *A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness.... a kind of prison... Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.... We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive.*

Let us be inspired by Einstein's wisdom so as to liberate from the prison the 565 bracketed words contained in the 173 pages of decisions before you. Let us widen our circle for it is indeed to this end *Biologische Vielfalt braucht unser Engagement Eine Natur, Eine Welt, Unsere Zukunft— One Nature, One World, One Future.*

Vielen Dank

Thank you for your kind attention.

## **THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

### **MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY 22 May 2008**

This Day serves as a reminder of the importance of the Earth's biodiversity, and as a wake-up call about the devastating loss we are experiencing as irreplaceable species become extinct at an unprecedented rate.

In any attempt to address this problem, agriculture should be viewed as a starting point. The crops and domesticated livestock of today are a reflection of human management. And the news is not good. About a fifth of domestic animal breeds are at risk of extinction, with an average of one lost each month. Of the 7,000 species of plants that have been domesticated over the 10,000-year history of agriculture, only 30 account for the vast majority of the food we eat every day. Relying on so few species for sustenance is a losing strategy.

Climate change is complicating the picture. Fluctuations in temperature and precipitation are wreaking havoc on crops. Experts say these factors may cost southern Africa up to 30 per cent of its maize crop by 2030. A diversity of crops and livestock is our best insurance in the face of these changes.

Livestock production is itself a major culprit in climate change, responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than transport. Biodiversity is directly threatened by this industry; about a fifth of terrestrial animal biomass goes to livestock – land that was once habitat for wildlife, and that can provide an important buffer against the impacts of climate change.

In a world where the population is projected to jump 50 per cent by the year 2050, these trends can spell widespread hunger and malnutrition, creating conditions where poverty, disease and even conflict can metastasize.

Preserving our planet's precious biodiversity is essential to development and security. Not just livestock and crops raised in agricultural landscapes, but also the many thousands of plants and animals in forests, oceans and other ecosystems need protection to maintain the planet's basic environmental balance.

We must rally behind attempts at a solution, such as the Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources adopted last September at a meeting supported by the United Nations. Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity are meeting in May to work, with all other partners, to redouble efforts to reduce biodiversity loss as they seek to achieve the global target set for 2010.

We all have a stake in supporting functional ecosystems, diverse in species and genetic resources, to sustain life everywhere. It is too late to undo the damage the planet has suffered, but it is never too soon to start preserving all that we have left. May this International Day for Biological Diversity unite us in this mission.