

**International Conference on
Wheat Stem Rust Ug99 -A Threat to Food Security**

**New Delhi India
6-8 November 2008**

Welcome by the FAO Assistant Director-General

- 1 Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Director-General of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, it is my great pleasure to welcome you here and to be with you in this important International Conference on Wheat Stem Rust Ug99 -A Threat to Food Security that is jointly organized by the Government of India and FAO.
- 2 Wheat is grown on more than 200 million hectares of land and is a source of food and livelihoods for over one billion people in developing countries. As you all know, wheat prices have doubled in the last year. Several years of severe drought, the high cost of fuel and the increased demand for grains are major causes for the increase of wheat prices. Any additional reduction in wheat yields will result in further increase in prices. With the climatic stress imposed on the wheat crop especially where it is rainfed, the impact of diseases is expected to be higher resulting in severe yield losses.
- 3 During the past few years, a new virulent strain of the wheat stem rust disease (Ug99), caused by a fungal pathogen, emerged in East Africa and was detected in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia, spreading to Yemen and Sudan and reaching Iran in late 2007. The regions of the Near East, Eastern Africa and Central and South Asia at immediate risk account for over 37 percent of global wheat production and with China, they account for 50% of total global production. In most countries of these regions, wheat is staple food crop, providing on average about 40 percent of the per capita calorie supply, and is especially important in the diets of the poorest.
- 4 This new rust strain is highly virulent to almost all wheat varieties grown in these regions and most wheat varieties around the world. The risk of its causing global epidemics is very real and could result in devastating yield losses. This would result in a serious threat to the food security in the most vulnerable regions of the world. Besides in the regions that are at immediate risk of Ug99 the cost of a 10% yield loss due to the rust disease would be over USD\$7 billion.
- 5 In response to Ug99, the Global Rust Initiative (GRI) was first established in 2005, and was later expanded to what is now known as the Borlaug Global Rust Initiative (BGRI). It includes the two centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), namely the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), Cornell University, some member countries, and FAO. The overall objective of BGRI is to systematically reduce the world's vulnerability to stem, yellow and leaf rusts of wheat, through advocating and facilitating the development of a sustainable international system to contain the threat and consolidate enhancements in wheat productivity.
- 6 Global activities on Ug99 and other wheat rusts have been initiated in an increasingly coordinated fashion by all BGRI partners, especially in the area of research and capacity building, race analysis, surveillance, breeding, and seed multiplication. FAO as a member of BGRI uses its comparative advantage and mandate to work directly with member countries in support of the Initiative through advocacy and policy support to facilitate development.