

***Statement of the Director-General  
on the occasion of World Food Day Celebration***

*New York, 23 October 2008*

*Mr Secretary General,  
Mr President of the General Assembly  
Mr President of the Economic and Social Council,  
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I should like to begin by expressing my profound gratitude to President Clinton for kindly agreeing to be with us for the celebration, here in New York, of World Food Day.

His presence does not surprise us because he has always been at the forefront of fights for major human causes.

The widening gap between fabulous wealth and abject poverty has pushed many dispossessed and desperate people to overseas or intra-continental exile, in search of the promised land.

But on the path of hope, how much drama and tragedy, how many dreams and illusions have ended in the fathomless waters of the oceans or under the glowing suns in the deserts...

Faced with immigration, some wealthy have barricaded themselves in their fortresses. But how can massive exodus be prevented other than through economic growth and especially agricultural development, given that 70 percent of the poor live in rural areas.

Surely, the governments of the Third World are the first to be responsible for ensuring the prosperity of their people. And fortunately some succeeded, even if they are not enough in number.

The recent financial crisis has shattered the triumphant certainties of the international economic management systems. It comes therefore at no surprise that at the initiative of President Nicholas Sarkozy, the highest political authorities are calling for a recasting of the international financial system and will be convening a summit to that effect on 15 November 2008, which will be hosted by President George W. Bush.

The food crisis is less spectacular but requires no less attention, as evidenced by its potential for significant risks to world peace and security.

In 2007 and early 2008, hunger riots resulted in social and political unrest in 20 countries in the different continents. In 2007 alone, the number of undernourished people increased by 75 millions instead of declining by 43 millions to achieve the World Food Summit target.

While food prices have begun to show a downward trend, falling by 14 percent since July 2008, the FAO Food Price Index in September 2008 was still up 51 percent from its value in September 2006. The prices of inputs have doubled, even tripled, and have become inaccessible to smaller agricultural producers.

In response to better incentives, developed countries, who have a higher elasticity of supply relative to demand, have increased their cereal production by 9.9 percent, while the developing countries have only posted a growth of 0.9 percent. In fact, excluding China, India and Brazil, production in this group of countries has actually fallen by 1.5 percent.

These figures are not a surprise because the international agricultural system is not fair and does not provide poor countries with the same opportunities as rich countries. The subsidies of the OECD countries, the high customs tariffs and the technical barriers to trade all distort the rules of competition in international trade.

We therefore need to revisit the international agricultural system that President Roosevelt and the founding fathers wanted to be more just and more mindful of the undernourished, when they

created FAO in Quebec City in 1945, well before the Bretton Woods institutions and even before the United Nations, whose Charter was ratified one week later.

Conscious of this, Nehru recalled in his economic decisions that "Agriculture cannot wait". He was in effect following the teaching of Mahatma Gandhi who stated: "There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread".

But the commitment of President Clinton today to the most fundamental of human rights, the right to food, and therefore to biological integrity and basic existence, is of singular importance.

For me, it is in fact a second chance to seize. On 28 December 2000, he had kindly received me in the Oval Office with Senator McGovern, following the ceremony to launch the school feeding programme.

I seized the opportunity offered to me to explain to him that this commendable initiative required to be supplemented by a programme to increase the production of small farmers, who account for 70 percent of the world's poor.

I outlined therefore the Special Programme for Food Security which is based on small water harvesting and irrigation works at village level, done with the support of the local workforce. By way of example, agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa depends on erratic rainfall for 96 percent of its arable land.

I also mentioned the need to build small metallic silos in rural communities because for some crops, 40 to 60 percent of harvests are wasted due to inappropriate storage facilities.

I finally added that modern inputs should be used - including seeds, fertilizers, etc. - that had underpinned the Green Revolution and had averted famine in Asia in the early 1970s.

I admit that I failed to observe the rules of protocol in the circumstances as one must not speak as much to the President of the United States, who is standing. Yet he listened to me with good will, attention and patience. And at the end of my plea, he replied with great conviction that those were the kind of projects that should be supported.

On the steps of the White House, I said to myself: "It is unfortunate that I haven't had this conversation with President Clinton at the beginning of his term of office" which ended few weeks later.

Last week, during the course of an interview, a journalist asked me what my message to the next President of the United States would be. I answered like the New York Times: I hope he will not only be "Commander in Chief" of his great country, but also "Farmer in Chief".

Former Heads of State, Senators, Members of Congress and other personalities have shown their firm commitment in the fight against hunger and, with your support, Mr. President Clinton, they could form a bipartisan alliance to mobilize the political will that is indispensable for the realisation of great intentions.

The United States, together with the countries of the G8, whose presidency will be assumed by Prime Minister Berlusconi, the European Union, the G5, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the other Member States of FAO and the United Nations must be able to convene, during the first half of 2009, a World Summit on food security at the level of Heads of State and Government, in order to reach a broad consensus to eradicate hunger from the world. The great window of opportunity offered today by the heightened awareness of the various crises could not be more propitious for such an initiative.

We need to build new international relations that would guarantee to the farmers of developed countries an income that is equivalent to that of their fellow citizens in the secondary and tertiary sectors, without penalizing the farmers of developing countries.

We need to muster the intelligence and imagination to invent “Farm Bills”, “Common Agricultural Policies” and other similar policies that would promote sustainable agricultural development based on fair international trade.

Finally, we must, during this World Summit, be able to find 30 billion US dollars per year to develop rural infrastructure and increase agricultural productivity in the least developed countries. Is this an unreasonable objective in a world in which 372 billion US dollars were spent in 2006 to support OECD farmers; in which 1 200 billion US dollars are spent each year on armaments; in which more than 3 000 billion US dollars were found in just a few days in an attempt to stifle the global financial crisis?

I don't think so. On the contrary, I am convinced that with the political will, it is possible.

Thank you for your kind attention.