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# FEATURE

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## UN PLANS CONFERENCE TO HALT MARCH OF DESERTS

by WILLIAM NDEGE

Fourteen percent of the world's population -- from 58 to 70 million people -- live in "drylands", lands where agricultural production is minimal, bordering on nil. And, according to a recently completed United Nations study, 15 percent of this drylands population, estimated to reach two billion by the end of the century, are immediately threatened by desertification, a scientific term meaning the advance of deserts into areas where vegetation exists and which are now, or could be, agriculturally productive.

The study, which provides an international survey of population and livelihoods at risk and analyzes the social causes and consequences of desertification, is one of many already carried out by the international body in preparation for the United Nations Conference on Desertification to be held in Nairobi, Kenya, at the end of August, and early September.

Some 2,000 delegates from all over the world are expected to attend the conference which will be directed by a well known personality in the field of environment, Dr. Mostafa Tolba, the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme headquartered in Nairobi. Dr. Tolba took over the helm of the UNEP from Maurice Strong, a Canadian, who was instrumental in the creation of the UNEP. Dr. Tolba is a bacteriologist and was a former minister in the Egyptian government.

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The focus of the inter-governmental conference will be a plan of action to be hammered out by the delegates in order to combat worldwide desertification and reclaim desertified land. This plan should be similar to the one adopted during the United Nations Conference on Water held at Mar Del Plata, Argentina, last March. Essentially, such a plan should provide guidelines and recommendations for the implementation of programs at national, regional and international levels. It will be based on scientific studies, the lessons learned from case studies and the prospects for transnational cooperation as shown by feasibility studies underway.

Of undoubted value to the delegates will be the case studies now being carried out by UNESCO and the UNDP in Tunisia, Chile, India, Niger, Iraq and Pakistan and the associated studies prepared by the governments of Australia, China, Iran, Israel, the United States and the USSR. Analyzing interactions between natural eco-systems, socio-cultural and political systems, these studies will provide a sound basis for understanding the complex processes of desertification, assessing its magnitude and directing and monitoring measures to combat it. A synthesis of the studies will integrate and sum up the lessons to be learned from these countries.

The Israel study, for example, will survey the recovery of arid and semi-arid areas in the Negev desert. The US case study will look at the history of land use and its ecological impact in the region surrounding Vale, Oregon, an area with severely cold winters. The Pakistan and Iraq studies will deal with salinification and waterlogging associated with failures in large-scale irrigation schemes.

Also being prepared for the conference are a global assessment of desertification, studies on climate, ecological change and technology as they relate to desertification, feasibility studies of trans-national projects and an assessment of present knowledge of the phenomena related to desertification.

Such studies will provide the framework for the discussions at this conference since action to combat the advance of deserts must be based on the proper use of science and technology. The role science could play at this conference and in subsequent action is four-fold:

- to ensure the application of available scientific knowledge in combatting desertification,
- to remove obstacles that hinder this application,

- to fill in gaps in the understanding of the processes of desertification and of their causes and consequences,
- and, in the final plan of action, to lead to research programs to meet these objectives.

It is clear that action to combat desertification must be conceived within a framework of national plans for land use and resource development. To do so will, however, require the strengthening and development of appropriate scientific and technological capabilities at the national, regional and international levels.

If this most recent conference is to succeed, the delegates will need to set aside political rhetoric, abandon a little of their national interests and contribute some of their financial, human and natural resources. The problems of financial resources and lack of technical manpower will certainly surface at this conference with Third World countries demanding that developed countries support the programs proposed. If action to combat desertification is to follow the conference, a fresh attitude of cooperation on the part of developed countries will be needed. At the same time, the hat in hand attitude of some developing countries will need to give way to practical self-reliance and the optimal utilisation of available resources.

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A Kenyan journalist, William Ndege was formerly with the Nation in Nairobi.