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Brazil Hosts U.N. Conference on Desertification

by LADB Staff

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The third UN Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Combatting Desertification (UNCCD) took place in Recife, Brazil, Nov. 15-26. Delegates from 159 countries, in addition to the representatives from the UN, financing agencies, and other nongovernmental organizations, attended. Although the conference focused on Africa, the continent hit hardest by the phenomenon, Latin America also received attention.

The convention, which requires the 144 signatory countries to cooperate in anti-desertification measures, went into effect Dec. 26, 1996. The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro produced three conventions on the environment, resulting in greater protection for biodiversity and reduced greenhouse-gas emissions, but international experts say wealthy nations seem to have forgotten desertification.

Climate change from ozone depletion threatens all countries, rich or poor, and biodiversity receives attention because of its link to corporate profits, but international donors have little interest in desertification, said Heitor Matallo Junior, coordinator of Brazil's anti-desertification Action Plan.

Desertification has natural and human causes Experts refer to desertization as the process resulting from natural causes such as lack of rainfall, while desertification is caused by human activity. Together, they cause the loss of 10 million hectares of cultivatable land each year, with effects on agriculture, ecological balance, and human development. The process affects approximately one billion people in more than 100 countries and one-fourth of the Earth's land surface.

Unsustainable human activities, such as overcultivation, overgrazing, deforestation, and poor irrigation practices, could trigger an uncontrollable spread of deserts, endangering the lives of millions of people and forcing them to migrate. Without immediate action, experts warn of a global crisis in the 21st century. UNCCD executive secretary Hama Arba Diallo told the delegates that authorities must decide whether "the world will continue studying catastrophes or act against the devastation" and take on the difficult challenge. He said it would take "as a minimum" an additional US\$22 billion a year during the next four decades to stop the advance of soil degradation and begin a process of restoration.

Latin America most at risk after Africa

On Nov. 8, the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which mobilizes and channels resources to fight desertification around the world, said Latin America must take steps to prevent its fertile land from turning into desert. More than 2.4 million sq km in the region are already considered arid and another 2.0 million sq km are semi-arid, warned Raquel Pena-Montenegro, IFAD director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

IFAD hopes to call international attention to Latin America and the Caribbean's high desertification rates, explained Pena-Montenegro. The most critical areas are in Brazil's northeast, northern Venezuela, northern Argentina, northern Chile, the high plains of Peru and Bolivia, and the dry tropics of Central America, Cuba, and Haiti, she said. Haiti has lost almost all its plant cover and is the Western Hemisphere country most affected by soil degradation. "Right now, only 1% of Haiti's plant cover remains," said a UNCCD official, who attributed the massive exodus of Haitians to the US in part to desertification.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID), which has financed projects to fight desertification in Haiti, has warned that early in the next century, Haiti will have no remaining plant cover. Programs financed by USAID and the World Bank have not been successful in stopping deforestation and desertification because approximately 70% of the energy used by Haitians comes from wood and charcoal. Brazil also faces serious problems. One reason Brazil was chosen as the site of the conference was its growing desertification. The drought in Brazil's impoverished northeast is no longer an annual phenomenon but has apparently become a permanent situation turning the region into a desert.

In Paraiba state, no rain was recorded during this year's rainy season, and 87% of the state's municipalities have no water, leading the government to declare the state a disaster area. The region has suffered food shortages for the last two years, with serious consequences for public health as infant-malnutrition and infant-mortality rates soared. Desertification threatens close to one-eighth of Brazil's national territory and covers parts of nine of its 27 states, home to 17.8 million people, according to Brazil's Environment Ministry.

Desertification in northeastern Brazil, as elsewhere, is closely linked to poverty, which acts as both cause and effect of the growing aridity of land. The ongoing droughts are the main impetus for the exodus of Brazilians to the large cities in central and southern Brazil. Funding controversy becomes North-South issue. The consensus that emerged over the problem's urgency collapsed when delegates turned to funding for solutions. "The big unresolved question is how much money the developed countries of the world are willing to allocate to deal with the problem," a convention staff member said.

The UNCCD permanent secretariat hoped to boost its two-year operating budget to US\$19.6 million from just US\$6.1 million this year. Affected countries and environmental groups criticized developed nations for not providing needed funds to prevent desertification despite speedy progress on presenting proposals and national action plans.

Some analysts said North-South relations hit their lowest since the end of the Cold War as delegates debated funding. The meeting was expected to conclude by early afternoon Nov. 26, but ended thirteen tense hours later. "A diplomatic disaster has been averted, but a lot of china has been smashed," said a conference source, requesting anonymity. "It will take time and effort by the industrial and developing countries to put together the pieces without anyone getting hurt again."

While the European Union (EU) member states have ratified the Convention, the US has not, thus providing funds to the UNCCD is primarily up to the European nations. Their refusal to meet the

demands of the developing countries unleashed a bout of name-calling, including accusations that delegates of developed countries were guilty of racism. After what conference sources said were "difficult discussions," delegates adopted a two-year US\$13.6 million budget to enable the secretariat to carry out a medium-term strategy. "Compromises are rarely perfect," Diallo said, conceding that the outcome of the conference was far from satisfactory for 41 African countries that had hoped for more funding from donor nations. Some European delegates were surprised at what they considered a lack of appreciation for their efforts in the face of financial constraints.

Austerity measures have brought a continuing decline in their official aid, which was only one-third of the UN target of 0.7% of industrial countries' GDP. "The implementation of decisions just adopted will require the sustained commitments by all actors concerned and a more decisive mobilization by the international community," said Diallo. "We will not be able to guarantee a minimum of success in the future if there is no continuity in the support provided to the affected countries." On Nov. 26, delegates signed a gradualist "Recife Initiative," rather than a hard-line "mandate," proposed by Latin America that would have set specific goals and time lines.

The initiative merely states "the need to formulate a declaration of commitment to promoting compliance with the convention," to be approved at next year's meeting. It says that "developing countries face obstacles" in executing their national action plans, a reference to the lack of technical and financial resources from wealthier countries.

Meanwhile, national legislators from around the world, meeting in a parallel forum, condemned the different treatment of the desertification convention, especially by wealthy countries, compared to the biodiversity and climatic change conventions the more "popular" environmental issues. "They are treated differently, given unequal weight, because desertification is a problem of the poor," said Brazilian Fernando Ferro. He said "prejudice and contempt" are also present within countries against their own areas affected by desertification.

The legislators criticized the US for not ratifying the UNCCD, therefore avoiding commitments and financial contributions to nations that are losing their fertile lands. Funding would be available if creditors canceled the foreign debt of the poorest countries and if the debt of other developing countries were invested in relieving poverty and fostering sustainable development, delegates to the alternative forum said. [Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 11/16/99, 11/17/99, 11/25/99, 11/27/99; Associated Press, 11/22/99, 11/27/99; Inter Press Service, 10/29/99, 11/08/99, 11/13/99, 11/16/99, 11/24/99, 11/26/99, 11/29/99; Reuters, 11/22/99, 11/29/99]

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