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**MESSAGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
COMBATING DESERTIFICATION**

Beijing, 22-24 January 2008

*Delivered by Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General
for Economic and Social Affairs*

Desertification and land degradation are a complex challenge with long-term social, economic and environmental implications. Some two billion people in the world today depend on the fragile ecosystems in arid and semi-arid areas. Ninety per cent of them live in the developing world, where increasing ecological stresses caused by desertification are threatening livelihoods. Small-scale farmers are particularly hard hit.

The impact of desertification is intensifying due to climate change, which is reducing the availability of freshwater, fertile soil, and forest and vegetation. As the degraded land loses value, investments in agriculture and rural development decline even more. This only worsens rural poverty and hampers sustainable development, setting us back in our efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

With this in mind, we must combat desertification as an environmental and developmental imperative.

We can take inspiration from local farmers who are more aware than anyone of this critical challenge, and are relying on their ingenuity and determination to respond.

Governments must play their part by integrating policies to combat desertification into national sustainable development strategies, and by providing incentives to attract investment to areas affected by desertification.

Promoting market access for farmers in these areas is crucial to their long-term prosperity. So is providing them with capacity building so they can adopt new technologies and sustainable farming practices. These support measures will be all the more effective when carried out through international cooperation as well as public and private partnerships.

The International Conference taking place today in Beijing offers a timely opportunity for combating climate change and achieving sustainable development in areas affected by land degradation.

At the same time, the potential of sustainable land management must be taken into full account during the upcoming negotiations on emissions reduction commitments under a successor to the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The climate change pact's sister treaty, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, is the most powerful tool for addressing land degradation in our international arsenal. The UNCCD offers a platform for adaptation, mitigation and resilience. The Ten-Year Strategic Plan adopted by its eighth Conference of the Parties provides an overall strategic framework for bringing broad-based local, national and international initiatives to fruition.

The UNCCD has enormous potential and deserves the support of all Governments. By fully backing this Convention in conjunction with efforts to combat climate change, we can maximize synergies to reduce environmental, social and economic vulnerability and expand the outreach of the adaptation measures.

I congratulate the Government of the People's Republic of China for convening this Conference and send my best wishes to all participants. Working together, we can make headway in the global struggle against desertification and land degradation.