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**Check against delivery**

**Remarks by the UNCCD Executive Secretary –  
CRIC23 Opening Statement**

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

Before we begin our work, allow me to reflect on where we stand.

Just a few kilometers from here lies one of the world's most important waterways, the Panama Canal. Today, water levels are at historic lows. Ships move more slowly. Transit is restricted. Costs rise. And the ripple effects extend far beyond Panama: from the Suez Canal to the Rhine, the world is watching.

But this is not only a story about global navigation, it is a story about people. It is about food prices, water scarcity, disrupted value chains, and strained livelihoods. It reminds us that land, water, climate, and economies are deeply interconnected, and



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that when land and water fail, everything downstream feels the impact.

This is the human reality I have witnessed in my first 100 days as Executive Secretary. Communities from Africa to Latin America are telling us the same thing:

“Healthy land and soils are the foundation of food, water, stability, and peace.”

And I want to begin by expressing my deepest appreciation to all Parties for your confidence in my appointment as Executive Secretary of this important Convention.

It is a profound responsibility.

And I commit, clearly and unequivocally, that I will serve all Parties equally, transparently, and with the utmost professionalism.

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This year is truly historic. Panama has become the first country to host meetings of all three Rio Conventions, climate, biodiversity, and desertification, in the same year.

This is more than symbolic. It shows that “when we tackle land, climate, and biodiversity agendas together, communities thrive.”

And Panama is demonstrating global leadership through its Nature Pledge, by integrating its climate goals, with its commitment to protect, restore, and sustainably manage half of its terrestrial and marine areas by 2030.

“Panama is showing the world what integrated action looks like.”

This is exactly the spirit needed to face what science and communities are telling us.

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Over the next days, we gather not to negotiate, but to deliver.



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CRIC is where we measure progress, identify gaps, and accelerate solutions.

Let me be clear:

“CRIC is not a negotiation body, it is a platform for delivery.”

I will ensure that the session remains constructive, and focused on implementation.

All Party requests will be addressed under their appropriate agenda items.

And I will work closely with the CRIC Chair, the COP16 Presidency, and the incoming COP17 Presidency to ensure continuity and coherence.

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Drought is advancing faster than ever, affecting millions today and threatening billions tomorrow. Three in four people may face drought by 2050 unless we change course.

From Egypt to Chile to the Sahel, the message is clear:



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“Drought is predictable, and if it’s predictable, it’s preventable.”

Since COP16, the Presidency has advanced the Tafá’ul Process to help parties to find possible solutions to achieve a negotiation outcome at COP 17

As Secretariat we’re committed to support countries to shift from a fragmented crisis response to an integrated drought risk governance.

We are:

- Strengthening early warning and anticipatory action
- Supporting drought-smart policy reforms
- Developing technical guidance
- Preparing the IDRO Observatory architecture to support evidence-based decision-making

These efforts support Parties in developing national drought plans, aligning ministries, improving water governance, and protecting vulnerable communities before crisis strikes.

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I want to thank the COP16 Presidency and partners for progress on the Resource Mobilization and Global Drought Resilience Partnership (RGDRP).

But a fundamental truth remains:

“Drought without finance remains words on paper.”

This is why advancing the Drought Resilience Investment Facility (DRIF) is crucial.

DRIF provides a practical roadmap to help countries identify pipelines of bankable drought-resilience projects, mobilize blended finance, and scale nature-based solutions.

We are also strengthening tools to support Parties in developing drought-smart investment plans through:

- DRIF national pilots
- RGDRP partner coordination
- Integration with IDRA and IDRO technical products



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Restoring land and investing in resilience makes economic sense:

- Each dollar invested in restoration yields up to 30 dollars in benefits.
- Investments in drought resilience pay off tenfold.

Yet today, only 6% of land restoration and drought finance comes from the private sector.

Let me state clearly:

“Only six percent of land restoration finance comes from the private sector, this must change.”

We need public, private, and philanthropic capital working together to unlock resilience at scale.

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Up to 40% of the world’s agricultural land is degraded, threatening food security, livelihoods, and rural stability.

Working with FAO, we are deepening cooperation on:

- soil health,
- integrated land and water management,
- agri-food resilience,
- early warning for food crises.

This collaboration is essential because:

“Healthy land and soils are not an environmental luxury; it is the backbone of food systems.”

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Rangelands sustain nearly half a billion people.

They store biodiversity, carbon, culture, and centuries of ancestral knowledge.



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But they remain undervalued, under-financed, and increasingly threatened.

As we prepare for COP17 in Mongolia and the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists:

“Rangelands sustain hundreds of millions of people, yet remain undervalued and under threat.”

This is the moment to elevate them.

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Everywhere I go, I meet the people who protect and restore land every day.

Their message is simple:



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“You cannot protect land without protecting the people who care for it.”

Women, youth, Indigenous custodians, farmers, and herders hold the knowledge and the courage needed to safeguard our soils and water.

But without:

- secure land rights,
- access to finance,
- opportunities for youth,
- and a fair share of benefits,

our restoration efforts will not succeed.

People are at the heart of the UNCCD mission.

More than three billion people are already affected by land degradation, human lives, not numbers.

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Excellencies, colleagues, friends,

We meet at a pivotal moment, a moment of rising droughts, declining water, and pressure on land. But it is also a moment of solutions, science, and collective determination.

The story of the Panama Canal reminds us of one truth:

“What happens upstream on land shapes everything downstream.”

Let us choose to shape it wisely.

Let us choose resilience.

Let us choose communities.

Let us choose the land that sustains us.

“Let us pledge, collectively and individually, to be united for land.”

I thank you.