

Statement on the Official Launch of the International Year of Mountains 2002

**Dr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
United Nations, New York
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**Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Honourable Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a privilege to be with you today to launch the International Year of Mountains. I am honoured to be among individuals and representatives of organizations dedicated to conserving the world's fragile mountain ecosystems and enhancing the well-being of mountain people.

Just as a mountain is made from innumerable, individual particles, so too the International Year of Mountains has come about because of the painstaking efforts of many women and men. I thank all those who have already contributed so much time, energy and thought to making the International Year of Mountains a reality.

In particular, I wish to thank President Akaev of Kyrgyzstan for his original proposal to designate an International Year of Mountains. His vision will, I am certain, result in positive changes in mountain communities - changes that will extend far beyond 2002.

I also wish to thank the Austrian, Swiss, Italian and other ambassadors to the United Nations who, as members of the International Year of Mountains Focus Group, planned this launch with us and worked so diligently to make it happen.

As I look around this chamber, I am greatly encouraged to see the diversity of countries, organizations, cultures and individuals here today. It is indicative of an increased awareness that all of us - whether we dwell at sea level or in the highest altitudes - depend on mountains for life.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Mountains are not the impenetrable, unchangeable monoliths of rock as many of us may have imagined. Indeed, they are as full of life as the oceans, and as essential to our well-being as tropical rain forests. More than half of humanity - three billion people - relies on mountains for safe, fresh water - water to grow food, to produce electricity, to sustain industries and, most importantly, water to drink. Yet, as we gather here today, mountain glaciers - the source of water for many of the world's river systems and people - are melting at unprecedented rates - a consequence, many scientists suspect, of global warming.

Mountains are also islands of biological diversity - not simply steeper or higher versions of ecosystems found in lowland areas, but home to a unique and seemingly infinite

variety of plants and animals found nowhere else. Many of these species have long since disappeared from flatlands, crowded out by human settlements and activities.

Mountains are also islands of cultural diversity. Home to one-tenth of the world's population, they are keepers of languages and repositories of traditions that enrich our human experience. Mountain people are the stewards of these vertical archipelagos of human and natural variety. They live in, and care for, landscapes that encompass sharp contrasts. Mountain environments are both fragile and fierce, beautiful and brutal. In them one can find sublime spirituality amid the most degrading poverty.

Indeed, as diverse as mountains and mountain cultures may be, they are exceedingly fragile. Together, we must find a way to protect and maintain these vital environments. Together we must strengthen mountain cultures and eliminate poverty and hunger. This is the essential challenge of the International Year of Mountains - to balance conservation and development.

I believe it can be done. The time is right. We have been building toward this moment for a long time. This special year evolved from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It was there, at the Earth Summit, that mountain issues took their place on the global workplan as the singular focus of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, the blueprint for sustainable development.

Since the Earth Summit, much has been accomplished. Through inter-governmental consultations we have been developing strategic plans and policies for the sustainable development of mountain regions. The global Mountain Forum, founded in 1995 by people present here today, continues to grow as the network of networks, providing support, information and advocacy for mountain peoples and their environments. Further, there are dozens of research projects already well under way that will ultimately yield the knowledge we need to solve complex mountain problems.

I see 2002 as providing an extraordinary opportunity to reinforce the implementation of Chapter 13, and to move mountains even higher on the global agenda, by increasing awareness of the importance of mountain ecosystems and cultures.

And in September 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg will offer an opportune checkpoint for taking stock, redefining issues and developing more effective approaches.

As you know, the Food and Agriculture Organization serves as the lead agency for the International Year of Mountains. We do this in collaboration with governments, UNEP, UNDP, UNESCO and other United Nations agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations. We at FAO are honoured to do this, and are proud of our role. We see this as essential work, and as an extension of our responsibilities as task manager for Chapter 13. We also believe that sustainable development of mountains will help us achieve FAO's goal of alleviating hunger and poverty so that all people at all times have access to the food they need for active, healthy lives.

The goal of the International Year of Mountains is both simple and ambitious: to ensure the well-being of mountain peoples by promoting sustainable development of mountain ecosystems. But there are two conditions that must already be in place if nations are to achieve that goal. The first is peace. The second is food security.

Mountain areas are home to most of the armed conflicts in the world as well as to many of the world's poorest and least food-secure populations. You cannot reliably produce food in conditions of war. The needs of people who are hungry, who do not know where their next meal is coming from - or if they will live to eat it - must be addressed first if we are to achieve our goals.

Indeed, as we begin commemorating the International Year of Mountains, conflict may be the single greatest obstacle to achieving our goals. Without peace, we cannot reduce poverty. Without peace, we cannot guarantee secure food supplies. Without peace, we cannot even consider sustainable development.

Every United Nations agency and every United Nations member country has a role to play in promoting peace. Together, we can make a difference. Already, together, we have made a difference. This was affirmed in October when the Secretary General and the United Nations itself were jointly awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

I urge you, as individual countries and as nations united, to seek out your unique role as peacemaker. Once you establish that role, your role in sustainable development and conservation of mountains will also become clear.

On our part, the Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS), FAO's concrete action at the level of rural poor, to assist them to produce their own food as well as generate employment and improve productivity and incomes, is already working on the ground in mountainous countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The SPFS, targeted mainly at low-income food-deficit countries, aims at improving household and national food security through rapid increases in food production and productivity, by reducing year-to-year variability in production on an economically and environmentally sustainable basis, and by improving people's access to food. The Programme is currently operational in 66 countries and under formulation in 17 others.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Wherever we may come from, however high or small the hills or mountains may be in the land of our birth, we are all mountain people. We are all dependent on mountains, connected to them, and affected by them, in ways we may never have previously imagined.

I invite you to join me today in committing ourselves to the eradication of both armed conflict and hunger as a first step in our observance of the International Year of Mountains.

Together, through this international year, we can move mountains.