

**2nd Summit of Central African Heads of State on Sustainable Management of the Eco
Systems of the Congo Basin**
Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Brazzaville, Republic of Congo
4 - 5 February 2005

Your Excellency, Mr Denis Sassou Nguesso, the President of the Republic of Congo
Your Excellencies, Heads of State
Honourable Ministers
The Chairman of COMIFAC
The Chairman of the African Union
The Nobel Prize Winner, Ms Wangari Muta Maathai
Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Distinguished Guests and Participants.

I greet you all on behalf of the President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Thabo Mbeki, the South African Government and the people of South Africa. President Mbeki requested me to stand in for him owing to other State commitments. He has also requested that I convey his esteemed gratitude for the invitation extended to South Africa to participate in this very important Summit. He is specifically excited about progress made in the development of the plans towards the sustainable management of the eco systems of the Congo Basin Forest. He has been following the developments closely through my Ministry as this has a big potential to contributing to the NEPAD initiative.

I would also like to thank you for allowing me to address this 2nd Summit of the Central African Heads of State on Sustainable Management of the Eco Systems of the Congo Basin. It is indeed a great honour. The South African Department of Water Affairs and Forestry has been part of this process before I was appointed as Minister. I am not new, though, in matters of water and forestry as I was Chairperson of our Parliament's Portfolio Committee for Water and Forestry. I therefore had insight into this process since the beginning. My predecessor, Minister Ronnie Kasrils, took particular interest in the sustainable management of these valuable assets of Africa, the second largest block of indigenous forests with the widest variety of biodiversity in the world.

This interest is derived from the spirit of developing Africa through NEPAD and the African Union while working towards delivering the Millennium Development goals. It is also in the spirit of sustainable development espoused at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002. We have taken note of the development of the Convergence Plan and its adoption thereof at the last meeting of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership held in Brazzaville in June 2004, a process that has culminated into this milestone. It has always been our view that the partnership should be managed through COMIFAC, which is an African initiative in the spirit of NEPAD and we are glad to see that this approach has been accepted by all parties.

Building on the comments made by the Honourable Mr Serge Lepeltier, Minister of Environmental, Natural Resources and Sustainable Development of France, on the need for a permanent dialogue between political partners, South Africa firmly believes that such dialogue should not exclude the African Union. The latter remains the credible and appropriate body that provides political guidance in the continent and will definitely assist on issues of governance.

We would like to emphasize the importance of involving local and surrounding communities in planning and management of forests. Presently Africa exports large volumes of unprocessed timber depriving her inhabitants of much needed jobs. While we support exports we would appreciate support for capacity building that would enable Africa to benefit locally in order to contribute to creating sustainable employment that would lead to poverty eradication. Forestry conservation in developing countries must, as part of its focus, provide support to sustainable livelihoods of local communities and contribute to poverty eradication. Honourable Chair, both the environmental and social goals can be met in a win-win picture around forests.

Historically, conservation activities have focused too much on the conservation of natural resources and disregarded human needs and sustainable use of resources. In certain places, this has brought destructive and negative impacts to local communities. However, our experience and that of many other countries is that this can be avoided through the involvement of local communities in the management of forests. Local people

often have deep and insightful knowledge of local forests, which our scientists and managers must learn to understand, codify and respect.

The relationship between women and natural resources is of particular importance. Often, the negative impacts of inappropriate management decisions are felt more by women than their male counterparts. There are experiences around the world of women having been excluded from sustainable harvesting of resources in forest areas, as a result of well-intentioned decisions by “experts”. It is important, in our commitment in Africa in ensuring the empowerment and protection of women, that our forest managers learn to examine and understand the specific roles and relationships of women to forests and natural resources. If forests are managed in consultation with communities and with women in particular, we will create powerful allies in the protection of these invaluable natural resources.

I would like to pay tribute to Ms Wangari Muta Maathai, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for Environment Conservation last year. As an African Woman I am very proud of her achievement. I hope that other women in Africa and the world will take after her superb example.

As a continent, we need to develop our capacity to manage our forests in an integrated and sustainable way. We look forward to France's pledge to reinforce consultation and promote dialogue, capacity building and development of technical expertise and improved governance. We hope all these efforts will lead to stronger economies, more job and most importantly reduction of poverty for the countries in the Congo Basin in particular and Africa in general. As a partner in this initiative, South Africa has some expertise that we can make available to assist the Congo Basin countries to realize their goals and aims in terms of sustainable development and conservation of the Basin forests and wildlife. I have instructed my officials within the South African Department of Water Affairs and Forestry to start discussing this role with the COMIFAC Secretariat on how to develop this exchange.

We should take the lessons learned from the co-ordination of this initiative to further the interest of Africa's participation in global forums such as the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF). An African forum that could be linked to the African Union, such as the African Minister's Council on Water (AMCOW), could be initiated to co-ordinate our approach to the global debates on the forests agenda, so that Africa could speak with one voice. In the meantime, let us make use of the present forums, such as the African Forestry and Wildlife Commission of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Africa Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (AFLEG) to co-ordinate our activities. Obviously, these fora would still play a key role in our activities. The next UNFF has to decide on the future of international arrangements on forests. It is, therefore, critical that, as a continent, we should have a position on what we want as Africa.

Chairperson, let me take this opportunity to thank the co-sponsors of this initiative. I want to thank the United States of America, which took immediate action to make this initiative happen. Together with the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO), the USA and South Africa assisted in organising the first meeting here in Brazzaville, to kick-start the initiative. The USA took the chair as the first co-sponsors. I want to thank France for agreeing to take the co-ordination role of this partnership. Chairperson, it would be wrong for me not to thank all the developed countries that have taken interest in this initiative, without their support we would not be where we are today. Important global players such as the World Bank, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the African Development Bank and all the role players, who are equally important, have also made important contributions and deserve to be thanked as well.

I would like to support the African countries in this initiative who have recognised, with foresight and wisdom, the immense importance of conserving these precious and remarkable forests. Such concerted action is crucial for us, as African countries, to prevent the destruction, and poaching of our natural heritage by all and sundry, from near and far, and to ensure that we retain, protect, and grow our natural wealth base. After all, these forests belong to our children, and our children's children. It is our job to look after our future generation.

In conclusion, we take this opportunity to add our voice to the international chorus for cancellation of Africa's debt to ease the burden of the past for purposes of channeling her scarce resources to eradicate poverty and thereby improve the quality of the lives of the poor in Africa.

I thank you.