



HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY HIGHLIGHTS TUESDAY, 3 JUNE 2008

The High-Level Conference on World Food Security: the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy opened on 3 June 2008, at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) headquarters in Rome, Italy. In the morning, after an opening plenary, a High-Level Segment convened. In the afternoon, the High-Level Segment resumed and a Committee of the Whole (COW) met to review the draft declaration of the Conference (HLC/08/3). The COW decided to reconvene the Informal Open-ended Working Group to carry out that review.

OPENING PLENARY

Giorgio Napolitano, President of Italy, underlined that the food crisis threatens the progress achieved so far towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and suggested that developed countries critically review their past policies. He stressed the need to look beyond the emergency and focus on improved long-term agricultural production. He stated that market mechanisms will not suffice to overcome the crisis and called for policies and actions set within, and implemented through, the UN.

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, noted that although the food crisis could undo work done toward building democracies, it is also a historic opportunity to revisit past policies and revitalize agriculture. He outlined some of the recommendations formulated by the UN High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, urged participants to act in partnership, and called for a greater level of international consensus on biofuels.

In a message delivered by Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State of the Holy See, Pope Benedict XVI identified the right to food as an ethical issue, and asked participants to consider the dignity of all people. He called hunger and malnutrition “unacceptable” in a world that has sufficient production levels, and pointed to structural barriers to adequate food supplies. He stressed the importance of structural reforms for tackling the challenges of food security and climate change.

Jacques Diouf, FAO Director-General, noted the meeting had become a “*de facto* summit,” in light of the food crisis. Expressing frustration that adequate funding had not been provided for programmes that would have assured world food security, he called for innovative solutions and urged delegates to engage in non-partisan discussion.

Gianni Alemanno, Mayor of Rome, deplored that the MDGs are unlikely to be reached.

Delegates elected Silvio Berlusconi, Prime Minister of Italy, as Chair of the High-Level Conference; Denis Sassou N’guesso (the Congo), Masatoshi Wakabayashi (Japan), Iztok Jarc (Slovenia), Leonel Fernández (Dominican Republic), Amin

Abaza (Egypt), Mark Keenum (US), and Jim Anderton (New Zealand) as Vice-Chairs; and Leonel Fernández (Dominican Republic) as rapporteur.

Delegates then adopted the Agenda and Timetable (HLC/08/2-Rev.5) and established the Committee of the Whole and other Arrangements (HLC/08/2-Rev.5 and HLC/08/INF/9-Rev.1).

HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT

Editor’s Note: for text and audio coverage of some of the speakers visit:

<http://www.fao.org/foodclimate/conference/statements/day1-am/en/>

The following Heads of State and Government addressed the High-Level Segment: Muhammad Hosni Mubarak, Egypt; Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil; Yasuo Fukuda, Japan; Danilo Türk, Slovenia; Isaias Afwerki, Eritrea; Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina; Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka; Nicolas Sarkozy, France; José Luiz Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain; Ismaël Omar Guelleh, Djibouti; Stjepan Mesić, Croatia; Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Islamic Republic of Iran; Marc Ravalomanana, Madagascar; Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe; Bamir Topi, Albania; Abdoulaye Wade, Senegal; James Alix Michel, Seychelles; Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, Mauritania; Hifikepunye Pohamba, Namibia; Boni Yayi, Benin; Amani Abeid Karume, representing Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, Tanzania; Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunisia; Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, Fiji; Ali Mohammed Mujawar, Yemen; Guillaume Kigbafory Soro, Côte d’Ivoire; Denzil L. Douglas, Saint Kitts and Nevis; Jim Marurai, Cook Islands; and Youssouf Saleh Abbas, Chad.

Ministers from the following countries also addressed the High-Level Segment: China; US; India; UK; Russian Federation; and Germany. The Vice-President of Cuba and the Deputy President of South Africa spoke.

Representatives from the African Union, the League of Arab States, and the FAO also addressed the High-Level Segment. Delegates heard statements from representatives of: the World Health Organization; the UN Conference on Trade and Development; the Alliance Executive of the CGIAR Centers; and the World Trade Organization.

Speakers widely acknowledged the timeliness of the High-Level Conference and the urgency of the food crisis. Many made reference to the 1996 World Food Summit and the little progress achieved since then, as well as to the threat posed by the current crisis to achieving the MDGs. They agreed that this crisis is one of food production, as well as of food distribution and access. There was a clear call for international solidarity and strong political will.

Some speakers highlighted the interlinked issues of food, energy and climate change, and noted that increasing fuel and transportation costs, devaluation of currencies, and

market speculation have led to a rise in food prices. One speaker added that oil-dependent items like fertilizers and farm implements contribute significantly to costs.

Underlining the role of agricultural subsidies and restrictive import regulations in the current food crisis, most developing countries called for their elimination. Various speakers highlighted small-scale farmers' need to access international markets. Speakers from developing countries also stressed the need for aid to focus on increasing productivity, scientific research, and strengthening of institutions. Several speakers called for additional support to the World Food Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development's capacity-building efforts while some noted the need for investment in rural development and technology transfers. Some underscored that food accounts for a far greater percentage of household expenditures in developing countries than in the North.

There was a divergence between opinions expressed on biofuels. While some felt that as long as there is hunger, no agricultural land should be used for fuel production, others argued that "sensible" biofuel production is possible, important to employment and welfare, and necessary in the face of global energy scarcity.

Some speakers emphasized the vulnerability of women, children, and small-scale farmers to the food crisis as well as that of Small Island Developing States to climate change impacts. One speaker highlighted the threat to peace posed by soaring food prices. Another expressed his disappointment with the Conference and called for the convening of regional meetings.

Several speakers noted that the crisis presents opportunities, drawing attention to enhanced national food security strategies and the potential for rising food prices to increase the contribution of the agricultural sector to economic growth. Ongoing efforts, including the Clean Development Mechanism, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, and the UN High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, were also highlighted as positive steps. One speaker noted that higher food prices have benefited certain agricultural production sectors, while another underlined that the food crisis creates an opportunity for developing countries with large agricultural potential.

Many speakers stressed short-term actions, including increases in food aid and international assistance for cooperation and development from developed countries, and willingness to meet emergency needs by releasing food from government stockpiles. Immediate action to ensure productive harvests in the next two years was also recommended. A number of countries outlined national emergency measures adopted to tackle the food crisis.

On mid- to long-term measures, many speakers called for: completion of the WTO Doha Round of negotiations; enhanced coordination and cooperation at the international and regional levels; a leadership role for the UN system; sustainable production of biofuels; development of other renewable energy sources; and aid for climate change adaptation in the agricultural sector. Many urged improving productivity in developing countries, to enable them to meet domestic demand and once again be net food exporters. Other suggestions included: a global mechanism to create a buffer against fluctuations in food production; establishment of seed banks; and an international expert panel on agriculture.

A few speakers also called for improved focus on access to funding and next-generation biofuels. Some identified the need to promote scientific guidance in the development of bioenergy and further study the impacts of biofuel production on food prices.

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

James Butler, FAO Deputy Director-General, called on participants to act "boldly, quickly, fairly," and to commit to urgent action in light of the challenges facing food security.

Henri Djombo, Minister of Forestry and Environment of the Congo, acting on behalf of COW Chair Sassou N'guesso, asked that the final declaration be substantive and that it reflect the need to develop biofuels and provide a response to climate change challenges. He stressed that the whole world has high expectations for this process. The Co-Chairs of the Informal Open-Ended Working Group explained the drafting process, and urged delegates to continue the spirit of cooperation in moving forward and in finding consensus on the declaration.

Participants focused primarily on procedural issues for working through the document, although some substantive discussion occurred. ARGENTINA expressed concern that only some of the causes of the food crisis were named, and suggested that it would be more useful to describe the causes in general terms and to focus on solutions. BRAZIL suggested including a reference to water resources. The procedural suggestions included convening a Friends of the Chair group, moving through the bracketed text in the COW, and re-convening the Informal Open-Ended Working Group. Delegates agreed on the latter.

IN THE CORRIDORS

As delegates gathered in Rome on Tuesday, they seemed to be well aware of the heavy responsibility placed on their shoulders: formulating concrete strategies and practical solutions to tackle the world's growing food crisis. The attendance of some 30 Heads of State and Government to what was qualified as a "*de facto*" summit by FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf reinforced their sense of urgency. Some delegates remarked that the various leaders' statements served a political purpose in asserting the importance of the issue, and succeeded in touching upon the very heart of the situation: uncertainty and discussion – some say speculation – about the causes of the current crisis and their relative importance.

Developing countries used the opportunity to reiterate their call for drastic reform of the global trade regime. While some large agricultural nations highlighted the advantages of – and the need for – biofuel production, one speaker stated that "feeding hungry people should have priority over the running of gas guzzlers." In this context, the remarkable lack of focus on the development of second- and third-generation biofuels seemed all the more surprising, not only because first-generation biofuels compete with food crops, but also because soaring oil prices may be a major but undervalued contributing factor to the current food crisis. Next-generation biofuels, as remarked by some, may well represent a promising solution to the growing costs of agricultural activities.

As to the third pillar of the Conference, some delegates noted with concern that climate change seemed to have been eclipsed by the issue of soaring food prices. Lamenting this shift in focus, one delegate remarked that, in the long term, climate change may prove to be a more important threat to food security than all other threats combined.