

A TREE FOR DEMOCRACY

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**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
PRESIDENT OLUSEGUN OBASANJO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCHING OF THE
1999 NATIONAL TREE PLANTING CAMPAIGN, GOMBE
5TH AUGUST, 1999**

A TREE FOR DEMOCRACY

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you today, for this very important occasion of the beginning of the 1999 National Tree Planting Campaign.

The theme for this year's campaign, *A Tree for Democracy*, is in tune with the spirit of these most exciting and challenging times in the history of our nation. This theme captures the mood of our people as we are collectively awakening to the realities of taking responsibility for the destiny of our country. The cardinal challenge is in the need to diligently nurture our freshly re-constituted democratic institutions until they blossom and eventually yield the fruits of Peace, Progress, Unity and Justice.

As we flag off the campaign today, we must not forget that all citizens are required to participate in the exercise. Similarly, as I have reiterated on several occasions, the new dispensation requires all hands on deck for the rebirth, reconstruction, revival and rejuvenation of our nation and the society within it. The choice of the theme is a reflection of our ardent desire to see our natural resources flourish, as democracy takes root and the nation and its people prosper in harmony with nature.

Gombe has been selected as the site for this momentous event in order to demonstrate how a progressive agrarian community, struggling with the twin problem of gully erosion and desert encroachment, may employ tree planting as a viable option for tackling the issues.

It is easy to take for granted the role of trees in our lives. But they are important biological resources for both our immediate physical needs as well as a critical factor in the ecosystem that supports all lives. For our physical needs, trees provide us with the wooden cradle at birth, food, building materials, furniture, medicines, fibre, resins, crafts, utensils, transportation and ultimately casket when we die. Trees also play an important role in providing life support systems for all living things. Trees are a great source of the oxygen that we breathe, soil fertility and rainfall. They also serve as wildlife habitat and reservoir of genetic resources for agricultural, medicinal and industrial purposes as well as protect soils and watershed. From the global perspective, we know that the role of trees in mitigating the adverse consequences of climate change is decisive.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, While we appreciate the necessity to exploit trees for our basic needs, the effects of unsustainable exploitation of this resource is

grave. Trees, if exploited sensibly, have the capacity to regenerate. Indeed the Almighty God in His infinite wisdom has made it possible for us to regenerate and replace all plants through seeds, seedlings and other means of propagation.

It is clear that rampant and indiscriminate felling or removal of plants without replacing them results in adverse environmental impacts which include land subsidence, soil erosion, silting of river courses, desertification, depletion of green belts in urban areas, and destruction of wildlife habitats. We, as a nation, therefore, have no choice but to protect our forests through afforestation and reforestation and conserving natural resources.

Our efforts at forest protection and afforestation date back to the 1930s when some areas were set aside as forest reserves, game reserves, sanctuaries and community forest. In 1976, there was an initiative by the Forestry Association of Nigeria (FAN) aimed at popularising tree planting at the community, local, and national levels. And in 1977, I had the honour of launching the national afforestation programme by planting a tree in the sub-sahel region of the North-West.

I thank Almighty God for today, when I have another opportunity to flag-off this year's Tree Planting Campaign. Let me commend the role and efforts of those who have contributed to the success of afforestation programme over the years, particularly the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Federal Ministry of Water Resources and the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA). Also deserving of commendation, are State Governments, Local Governments, communities and traditional rulers, bilateral and multilateral agencies such as European Union, The World Bank, The African Development Bank, and non-governmental organisations including the Forestry Association of Nigeria (FAN), Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF), Nigerian Environmental Study and Action Team (NEST).

Today, the global attention is focused on achieving sustainable development through conservation of natural resources including forest resources. In 1992, I had the honour of participating in the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED), otherwise called the Earth Summit, held at Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, when serious concern was expressed about the rapid rate of the loss of our forest resources. The outcome of the Earth Summit includes the adoption of the Forest Principles, Agenda 21 and other important instruments. The Rio Process and its Resolutions have since continued to be the reference point and guiding principle for national and international action towards achieving sustainable development with eco-sensitive considerations.

Our Administration's policy on environmental protection and management would be largely guided by the Rio Decisions, which are based on partnership and co-operation. This Administration plans to join the rest of the world in recognising the need to sensitively

and judiciously manage our environment through co-ordinated and harmonized government policies. It is in this regard that our Administration has now created the new Federal Ministry of Environment to be responsible for designing and implementing a proper framework for the co-ordination of environmental activities in the country.

Through the Ministry of Environment, we shall implement our environmental agenda called *Environmental Renewal and Development Initiative* (ERDI), with the following objectives :

- (i) to take full inventory of our natural resources, assess the level of environmental damage and design and implement restoration and rejuvenation measures ; and
- (ii) to evolve and implement additional measures to halt further degradation of our environment.

This new Ministry is not really the beginning of our awareness of environmental issues. In the past, environmental issues have been handled piecemeal, with agencies created in various other ministries to carry out tasks as they arose. There are literally dozens of these agencies in existence today.

The Environment Ministry has the responsibility to develop viable programmes to tackle Nigeria's major environmental problems, such as drought and desertification control. In this regard, the Ministry will work with other Ministries to produce the blueprint for a National Action Programme that will entail the participation of all Ministries and Agencies, Non-Governmental Organisations, Youths, Women and Farmers' Associations, in line with the UN Convention to protect the environment.

Our Administration is working at immediate solutions to some of our pressing environmental problems :

- (i) desert encroachment in the northern parts of the country,
- (ii) coastal erosion along our coasts,
- (iii) gully erosion in the south-eastern states,
- (iv) deforestation in the south-western and the middle-belt.

Our programme will be comprehensive and appropriate. They will also focus on the establishment of green belts across the country, landscaping in urban areas. In the rural areas there will be community wood lots, fruit orchards and windbreaks. States with problem of mining wastelands will be targeted with a campaign for land reclamation.

Henceforth, the National Tree Planting Campaign will not be a one-day affair, but rather an occasion to initiate a sustained exercise of tree planting by all and sundry, until every day becomes a tree planting day ! Our target this year is to establish 1,000 hectares of plantation, which will be followed by 3,000 hectares annually as from next year.

State and local governments are urged to involve all segments of society particularly our youth in tree planting and nursery activities. In this respect, the National Youth Service Corps and students on vacation should be deployed to areas of such need. Government will facilitate their active participation by providing appropriate incentives. I also urge the Police, Military and Para-military formations to actively participate in the exercise by planting trees in their barracks and offices. Similarly, our Royal Fathers are urged to mobilise their subjects to plant trees on their farms, around their homes, their mosques and churches and market places.

I call on the private sector and Non-Governmental Organisations to continue to participate in such activities as adoption of avenues, parks and gardens, for planting and nurturing as well as enhancement of public awareness in afforestation. Let no one cut a tree without planting at least another one in replacement.

Government is resolved to strengthen the capacities of relevant research institutes and centers of excellence including Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria (FRIN), Rubber Research Institute, Nigerian Institute for Horticulture (NIHORT), Center for Arid Zone Studies (CAZS), and Centres for Energy Research (CER) to enhance their effectiveness. These institutions will appraise fast-growing local economic tree species and develop appropriate silvi-cultural practices for our tree planting exercises. They should also develop appropriate training modules and public awareness materials to empower local communities to undertake plantation management. To complement our efforts at afforestation, the Government will encourage research into developing and popularising alternative energy and energy-efficient technologies such as solar and gas cookers, biogas, biomass stoves, etc., to reduce pressure on forest resources.

To our development partners, our doors are open to gestures of international partnerships. The world is increasingly becoming a global village. This is more so with respect to environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification and drought. In all these problems afforestation is a common celebrated mitigative measure. Therefore any show of solidarity in this our national endeavour will be a further demonstration of our collective commitment to fulfill our obligations under the various relevant global agreements. We are also motivated by the fact that apart from protecting and greening the environment, tree planting has the potential of alleviating poverty by providing livelihood to our people through the establishment of economic plantations for fruits, wood and resins.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, To protect the existing forests and plantations established in the course of this campaign, we shall encourage state and local governments to enact stringent regulations and prescribe stiff penalties against bush burning and wanton felling of trees.

Finally, let me seize this opportunity to thank the people and Government of Gombe State for their warm reception and hospitality extended to me and my entourage. We deeply appreciate the efforts of the people of this young State in making their environment healthy and productive for the present and future generations.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I now have the honour and pleasure to flag-off the 1999 National Tree Planting Campaign and urge all Nigerians to join me in successfully planting *A Tree for Democracy!*

I thank you. God bless you all.

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