



Official Launch of  
**Kweneng North Indigenous Vegetation Project**  
On World Day to Combat Desertification  
Lephepe Kgotla  
June 17, 2003

Comments by Bjørn Førde  
Resident Representative

*Director of Ceremonies*  
*Honourable Assistant Minister, Rre Seloma*  
*Bakwena Paramount Chief, Kgari III*  
*Kgosi Rantho and Kgosi Lebati*  
*Member of Parliament for this area, Major General Moeng Pheto*  
*District Commissioner, Mr. Malikongwa*  
*Honourable Councillors here present*  
*Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen!*

It is a great pleasure and a privilege for me to be present here in Lephepe today, to participate in the launch of the *Indigenous Vegetation Project* for Kweneng North, on the *World Day to Combat Desertification*. This project has already been launched in Boteti and Kgalagadi South, and I am pleased to see delegates from these two regions here to share this important event with us.

The environmental problems that we see around us here in this area are unfortunately not unique to Kweneng, or even to Botswana. Countries all over the world are seeing land that was once productive be-

come wasted through its inappropriate use and the combined forces of nature and man.

This prompted the United Nations to call the countries of the world together in 1977, in Nairobi, to discuss how desertification can be effectively tackled. Although this was 25 years ago, we have not been able to progress far down the road. Deserts continue to expand, and the livelihoods of people affected by desertification continue to deteriorate.

This year, in his statement to the international community, the UN Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan, emphasizes the following:

*“Desertification and drought pose an ever-increasing global threat. Human activities such as overcultivation, overgrazing, deforestation and poor irrigation practices, along with climate change, are turning once fertile soils into unproductive and barren patches of land. Arable land per person is shrinking throughout the world, threatening food security, particularly in poor rural areas, and triggering humanitarian and economic crises.*

*“All parts of the world are affected. But nowhere is the problem of desertification more acute than in sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of environmental refugees is expected to rise to 25 millions in the next 20 years.*

*“Because the poor often farm degraded land that is increasingly unable to meet their needs, desertification is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Fighting desertification must therefore be an integral part of our wider efforts to eradicate poverty and ensure long-term food security. Let us today recommit ourselves to the goals of the Convention on Desertification, and to achieving sustainable development for all, including in the dryland rural areas where the world’s poorest people live.”*

All over the world, people, governments and international organizations like UNDP work together to try and reverse the negative developments we see around us with regard to land and land degradation. One such effort is the *Indigenous Vegetation Project* which we are launching here today. This project is organized by the government and supported by UNDP.

But let me say that it will not be the Botswana government nor UNDP who will find the ultimate answers to the challenges facing people in this area. They will assist you. But they will also look to you, the people who live in this environment, to provide working models for reversing desertification.

This is *your* project. Ultimately it is the people of this area who will decide the best road to take in reaching the project goal of developing sustainable rangeland management systems, and thus rehabilitating the environment and reducing poverty. It is yourselves who will lead the way down this road that we will travel together.

Over the next five years you have an opportunity to effectively address the environmental challenges that you face. How you take advantage of this opportunity is up to you.

However, let me encourage you that myself and my colleagues here today from the United Nations Development Programme, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Kweneng District Council will do our best to support you along the way. We will be available to give you advice when you need it, to assist with training and capacity building, and to provide logistical and financial support where necessary.

In five years time, we hope that you, alongside your colleagues from Kgalagadi and Boteti, will be demonstrating implementable models for community-driven rangeland rehabilitation. These models are also aimed at increasing global knowledge and understanding about the biodiversity that exists in arid areas, and above all, reducing poverty and hence improving livelihoods especially at grass root level.

Furthermore, these models have the potential to transform the way communal rangelands in Botswana, and indeed Africa, are managed and utilized. What you achieve here will be showcased to contribute towards the revitalisation of rural economies in Botswana and elsewhere in Africa.

I am confident that you can make this project a success, and I wish you all the best in your efforts.

**PULA!**