

SPEECH BY HUGO CHAVEZ FRÍAS, PRESIDENT OF THE BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA, DURING THE 6TH SESSION OF THE UNCDD

HAVANA, SEPTEMBER 1, 2003

Do you have a bell there, Fidel?
How many minutes?
There is no red light here?

Fidel Castro:

No red light, no bell, everybody here is entitled to express opinions freely and calmly, without anxiety.

President Chavez:
Thank you very much!

HE. Mr. Hama Arba Diallo, Executive Secretary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and Draught, my dear friend and colleague. H.E. Mr. Fidel Castro, comrade, brother, friend and President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cuba.

H.E. Mr. Ibrahim Ganvari, Under Secretary General of the United Nations. Excellencies Heads of State, Heads of Governments, Vice Presidents and Parliament Presidents, Heads of Delegations and Delegates from the whole world.

Ministers of Foreign Affairs, State Ministers, and Ambassadors of the World accredited to the Government of the Republic of Cuba, fellow countrymen from Venezuela, members of the delegation accompanying friends from the press, photographers, cameramen, all my friends and me.

May I first of all express my happiness for being here now.

Here again in Havana, in this city, in this Cuba which have held high for decades the banners of dignity for Latin America and the Caribbean.

I want to transmit on behalf of the people of Bolivar, the people of Venezuela, the best and deep felt regards to the heroic people of Cuba, the people of Martí, the Cuban people.

And through the Cuban people, through you, to all the nations of the world, to all the peoples of the Earth. Particularly the peoples of the Third World, the peoples fighting for survival.

And as Martí said to the poor: "With the poor of the Earth I want to share my fate".

We are here now, today 1st September, at the beginning of the last third of this third year of the 21st Century, which is from the start full of storms and hurricanes, regretfully!

A few days ago, Mr. President, we saw the planet Mars shining in the sky.

A poet would say Mars came near the Earth for a kiss.

Apparently when Mars came to kiss the Earth 60 thousand years ago Mars was still a planet full of rivers, mountains and civilizations.

Today we know it is a desert, or at least from here it looks like one. Some say there was an International Monetary Fund over there.

It seem plausible, doesn't it?

It seems that 60 thousand years ago Neoliberalism was applied to Mars and the planet was destroyed. Some astronomers said that when Mars came near and saw what is happening here, he became red with shame and pain when he saw how we, or better to say, how the dominant evil forces in our planet keep trying to destroy the Earth, a process which has been under way for a long way.

Let's hope that when Mars returns after the next 300 years according to the astronomers, he doesn't find an Earth resembling him, full of dust and deserts, and that is what we struggle for, to save our planet, to save life, to save the future, to save the dreams of our children and grandchildren.

I was telling Fidel (FIDEL CASTRO) yesterday when I arrived, that my little girl Rosinés who calls him "grandfather" I don't Know why?, sends him regards. She is 6 years old and when I went to say good bye to her yesterday in Venezuela, she was drawing a long road on a little piece of paper.

I asked her:

- Where does that road lead?
- It leads to Havana, she said, to Cuba.

And on both sides of the road she drew trees, bushes, flowers.

Such is our children's dream, long roads, smiling suns, blue clouds, many trees, flowers and bushes.

Let us fight for that dream to come true.

Now, when we see the crude reality of this planet headed for destruction, it is urgent that we find out in our meetings, in our assemblies, in our United Nations conventions, what has been happening during the last years.

It is very troublesome what has happened during the last years, we have been attending these conferences and summits for five years, we try to participate in all of them, to share opinions and to learn from you, the documents, the meetings, promoting ideas and awareness.

Fidel has been talking about it for 30 years, since the first time desertification was discussed, in 1967. I have been reviewing some documents:

The Action Plan to Combat Desertification was approved by the United Nations at that time.

Then, in 1991, the United Nations Program for the Environment recognized that in spite of the plan adopted four years before the problem was growing, and there were no signs that it would stop, even with the implementation of an action plan.

Then comes in 1992 the Earth Summit to Combat Desertification with a binding character.

Later came, how many summits?

The Millennium Summit, the Monterey Summit and the Johannesburg Summit.

And what has happened in the 26 years elapsed since the adoption of the action plan to combat desertification? Can any one assert – in truth – that the problem has abated?

Can any one say, without risking to be called a liar, that the problem is under control or that the plan is working? I don't think so. I believe that the Earth is falling apart, and the same has been said by many other before me, in different words. Many decisions have been made, many statements issued, very well written, worthy of Martí and Shakespeare, or any other famous writer.

But none is implemented.

Fidel, you talked about a zero point zero, zero, zero three per cent (0.0003%) of the GNP and the expenses related to the occupation of Iraq. Applied mathematics. I read somewhere that Pythagoras said "God speaks through mathematics", and I think Pythagoras was right: Mathematics.

Bearing in mind this science, it can be applied to the resolutions and decisions adopted in the last 30 years in favor of life, equality, against desertification and poverty, because that is the phenomenon, poverty, the rest are variables of an equation, the equation of death.

But today we can say that none of them has been implemented, that what has been done is insignificant compared to the seriousness of this problem. And it is clear, Fidel: Zero point zero, zero, zero (0.000).

I think that is the truth.

Simón Bolívar, the Forefather and Liberator of Venezuela and this continents once said: “Political gangrenes cannot be cured with palliatives”.

Who has ever seen a cancer cured with wet cloth? I believe in these meetings as you do, my colleagues and friends Heads of State, and I believe we should come – whether to Havana, Johannesburg, Washington, Paris or Caracas – or wherever they are held – to tell the truth.

The truth of the truth.

We should not “beat around the bush” - as is commonly said – we should not perfume the excrescence. The truth must be said and the truth, according to the great Hindu philosopher Krishna Murti “is what connects us with reality, anything else is a lie”.

Next year this Convention will arrive to its first decade. In my opinion Mr. President, dear friends, the political will to face these problems is almost null, so – Fidel – we may express the political will by a formula:

PW: 0,0000 – I don’t know how many more zeroes – one.

There is no political will. Particularly among those whose will is more powerful when decisions concerning the planet are made.

The big problem is a political one. And when I say political, I also say ethical: Ethics and politics.

Thus, the big solution must be both ethical and political. Politics come first.

A new ethics should come forward. The problem is not a technical one, it is ethical and political in the first place, that is the root of the serious problem our planet is facing.

Fidel also said, if I am allowed to quote, and everything is allowed here.

He said that the economic system imposed on the world is incompatible. That is unquestionably true.

We say the same in South America when they tell us about integration. The integration of our countries and peoples is incompatible with the economic model imposed on the Americas.

When we talk about democracy, equality, human rights, we must also say that human rights, real democracy and equality are incompatible with the political and economic models imposed on us, Southern countries, Third World countries.

With all respect I will go as far as to criticize a little detail:

If we look at the logotype of the United Nations symbol, we can see that we are looked upon from the north, the northern view point. I have nothing against the peoples of the North, we are all brothers in this world, but see how distorted is our dearest South America, in this world seen from the Pole Star.

How beautiful would the world be if it were seen from the Southern Cross!

Our view point, the southern view point. This map has been imposed on us. Fidel, I suggest we find some painter to draw the world upside down and then put the drawing to the vote, maybe we would be able to place a second symbol side by side with the first one.

How does the world look upside down?

I think it must look different. Let the Argentineans over there tell us. Greetings to my Argentinean brothers.

We recently visited the South Cone, Montevideo. Many things are happening in Latin America.

Very interesting winds are blowing in Latin America, a reason to be optimistic despite what is said here, true assertions, which are not aimed at generating pessimism but at achieving the recognition of the reality and at raising the awareness of the need to fight, because this is a fight, a battle!

We have come here to fight, not even for us, but for our children and for the future of our peoples.

Now then, if our fight is incompatible with the economic model imposed on the world, what shall we do?

The great solution is to change the economic model imposed on the world, to modify the philosophical, intellectual and ethical framework of the neoliberal plan of the new international order that proclaimed itself victorious after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin wall.

But today it is no longer victorious, it is defeated and we are going to proclaim its defeat:

- Neoliberalism, you are defeated!

The pretentious Washington consensus, the London No Alternative is defeated, we are going to bury it at the commencement of this century and we are going to reach a new world consensus.

This is not a death pact but a life pact, it is going to be difficult, but who said we like the easy way?

I am a true Christian, and Fidel told me he is also a Christian in the social sphere. After a long debate on Christ, the Redeemer, Fidel admitted that he is a Christian, socially speaking. Allow me to share these confidences, my brother.

Well, now look at the way Cuba has done it, Cuba has her own system, not imposed from outside, attained with courage and struggle. 40 years of blockade, aggressions, but here is Cuba and the greatness of the Cuban people, the people of Martí.

In Venezuela we have started to remake our homeland, our road and to create a new model, we do not wish to copy from anyone.

Simón Rodríguez, the great master, Bolivarian philosopher, said we Latin Americans should not copy foreign models.

We are not trying to copy a model, but to invent the most appropriate model for the characteristics, the history, the geography, the idiosyncrasy, the sociology, the peculiarities of each people, each region.

We have started to rebuild ourselves.

Venezuela was destroyed during 200 years – no, that's not true – during 500 years, since the moment that an Admiral named Colon took his ships, crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and landed in the costs of Venezuela thinking he had reached India.

His compass was slightly mistaken, but since then we have been called Indians. Then came a Mr. Américo Vespucio in another ship and said “I have discovered America” and this continent became America.

500 years. Then they proceeded to Africa, our beloved sister, and enslaved their peoples. They did one good thing, though, they mixed us and here we are in what someone once called “the perfect blend”, black, Indian and some white blood together. We have nothing against the white people, I reiterate, and I greet all the whites here.

Concerning Venezuela, Mr. Secretary General, you will remember that we were in Geneva in October 2001. We had been invited by Hama Arba Diallo to the 5th Conference of this Convention and we were there and share some thoughts and committed ourselves with the Convention.

We have been learning and we have understood that the combat against desertification is also the combat against poverty.

Nothing can be isolated from the whole and as we said in Geneva – there is also a desertification of ideas.

We need to plant ideological trees all over the world. Against the attempts to uproot ideologies and love, we need to refill the world with love, with new and old ideas.

The desert is also related to this.

A desert of values, a desert of love, a desert of principles.
These deserts are more dangerous than the geographical ones.

We left Geneva after signing the agreements and a few days later we were in Caracas adopting 49 laws to be added to the constitutional project that we Venezuelans adopted in 1999, the new Venezuelan Constitution the only one in our history voted by the people and openly discussed before becoming The Constitution.

30 days after attending the 5th Convention in Geneva we adopted, among those 49 laws, a very important one: the Law of Lands and Agrarian Development establishing the mechanisms to put an end to landed states, and to promote a comprehensive development of the country side, of peasant men and women.

We also adopted a Water Law, to rescue the water resources, to distribute them equally, to clean the waters spoiled by the model, how did you call it, Fidel? The model, the oil age, but you said another world: Savage, what was it?

Fidel Castro:

- I said "the fatal age"

President Chavez:

- Fatal. The fatal oil age.

Fidel Castro:

Because in this chaotic world you were talking about, a magnificent natural resource that is useful in many ways has been turned into a lethal weapon against mankind. Because the 80 % of the gradual pollution causing the warming up of the atmosphere, the draughts, the rains, the cyclones, the erosion, desertification and weather changes come from the abusive use of these resources, mainly by societies or countries which took over the rest of the world and imposed their systems on us.

They imposed on us the situation we are now facing, and even the water has to be saved. That is all right, but since we need to tell the truth we must ask:

Who is to blame for the calamities faced by this world of 6.3000 million inhabitants and for the dangers that are threatening it?

Who are the rich?

Why are they rich? So we have the right to demand instead of begging the assistance that with the cooperation of all would support this world where many do not realize that before Rosinés attains the age of 60 the world will have more than 10 thousand million inhabitants and there will be no oil, no water, I wonder how much fresh water could be left by then, how much oxygen, how clean would the atmosphere be, how much carbon dioxide will the ozone layer hold?

That is why I asseverate that all the problems of desertification and climatic changes are closely interrelated, strong words can be said, but here we are striving for cooperation, not confrontation.

President Chavez: Now you will discount this time from my speech.

Fidel Castro:

No Chavez, I am sure that you have more and better things to say than I do.

President Chavez:

Thanks Fidel for your support, thanks Fidel for your comments.

In Venezuela we adopted a set of laws for the water, the fishery, the lands, in order to initiate the transformation of the model.

And what happened? That was on November 2001.

On December of that year 2001 started the conspiracy framed by the elite, the oligarchy, the great forces that had governed Venezuela for decades, or centuries, together with their hegemonic international allies, then came the terrorist, oligarchic, national and transnational coup d'état on April 11, 2002, intended to stop this project and to derogate all these laws which are already having a positive impact on the real transformation of a savage system which has ravaged a large portion of our country and has contributed to the devastation of the planet.

Of course the leaders of this coup in Venezuela and their international allies had not foreseen the reaction of the people and the unexpected happened, the tyrannical and despotic government that had overthrown our government and imprisoned me, massacring the population, was in turn overthrown by the people before the rooster sang three times.

The dictatorship did not last 72 hours and the Constitution was restored, and our people is fighting for this flag, this cause and this project.

Well then, as I was saying a while ago, this view point is not exposed to make you feel pessimistic, but to recognize the scope of the problem, and as Fidel said a minute ago, we cannot be begging from the powerful of this world, we must uphold our dignity, not our individual dignity but the dignity of the peoples that have been oppressed, exploited and massacred for such a long time, the dignity of the heroes who fought and died for the freedom of our countries during the last five hundred years.

We cannot become beggars, we cannot preach in the desert. We in Venezuela what we do is to demand, regardless of the size or power of the others, we demand respect.

Eduardo Galeano, one of our greatest, in reference to this has said that we are not underdeveloped countries, what we are is overrun countries, we have been overrun for centuries, but we have to uplift our dignity, our moral force to make our claim to the world, particularly to the northern developed countries, whose dignified representatives are also here and we express our respect to their heads of states and government and our best regards to their peoples, but since we have been overrode, invaded, and vexed over the centuries, and nobody should take offense at these words because they are true, and as José Gervasio Artigas, the leader from Uruguay said: “My truth causes no offense and gives me no fears”, and this is the truth, at least our truth.

As the world changes, very strong winds of change are blowing through South America, not only in Venezuela, but also in Brazil, Argentina and many other countries that are witnessing the rise of new leaders. I come from that South America which is right here, next to the Caribbean.

In South America, let me tell you, only three years ago maybe less, we felt lonely at the summits in adopting a stand, in making proposals, in criticizing Neoliberalism, in suggesting debates on topics such as the foreign debt or the FTAA.

In fact, only when Fidel attends a summit, sometimes he cannot attend because he is democratically excluded, but in some occasions, for example, the first time Fidel and I coincided in a summit and started to argue with the other presidents, we were left alone, the two of us. I remember Fidel wrote a note on a small piece of paper:

- I no longer feel as the only devil in these summits.

However, nowadays in most of the meetings held by South American presidents the criticism of Neoliberalism, the debate on the foreign debt, the FTAA, the WTO, poverty and peoples have become common topics. I must tell you that in South America there are strong winds of change, as in other parts of the world, the world is changing.

Can we do anything to accelerate this change?

Yes, we can.

How?

In the first place, telling the truth. Secondly, joining our wills, devising a strategic plan, walking together. It is essential to unite the South, because the North is united, they get together and make decisions.

But every time it is more difficult for them to do so. According to the last news I herd, one of these northern summits will be held on board a transatlantic ship, in the middle of the ocean, in order to escape from the harassment of the opponents of globalization and the poor of the world.

The union of the south is a most, but a union to free ourselves, not to continue enslaved.

At what cost?
At whatever it takes.

At the cost of life?
Yes, it does not matter, how important can the life of a man, or a woman, or a group of us be if the aim is to save from this threat millions of persons, even those yet unborn or who are being born right now.

In South America, for example, we are proposing the establishment of such unity, but not the unity suggested by Washington, the FTAA, the Free Trade Agreement for the Americas, because to sign this agreement as it is would be to sign the death sentence for our grandchildren. From Venezuela we are suggesting an alternative to the FTAA, because we are certain that it is not the right way, well, maybe only the right way to hell. We are suggesting the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, the ALBA, based on the ideals of Bolivar, who fought two hundred years ago and shaped only a portion of his dream which was later chattered, but Bolivar's ideal was to unify all the Caribbean, he said so in Jamaica, Percival Patterson knows what I am saying because he is a Bolivarian.

I dream, he said in Kingston in the year one thousand and sixteen, of making this part of the world into only one great nation, greater for its freedom and glory than for the huge wealth lying in its womb. The integration of our peoples.

And this is valid for Africa and for Asia, we have to walk the southern ways, with more strength than in the past, the same banners, but more strength.

For example I tell the South American peoples that with political will and a little courage we could create a monetary fund for Latin American, and the Caribbean of course.

Who says we cannot do it?

A different monetary fund, ruled by us. I tell the South Americans that we have oil and state owned oil companies. We could create a Petroamerica integrated by Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Cuba which also has oil, Fidel told me recently that by the year two thousand and eight they will be ready to join the OPEC, it seems that there is an oil field under the island.

Trinidad and Tobago is one of the first producers of gas in the continent. I recently paid a visit, dear friends of the Caribbean, to our comrade Prime Minister Mannin, there in Port of Spain, and he proposed a project to me and I immediately told him he can count on Venezuela's support, because we have joined the gas fields in the Trinitarian and Venezuelan Atlantic area which contains important gas reserves. The project is to build a gas pipeline until Guadalupe, I think. I told him Venezuela is ready to cooperate in the construction of this pipeline to take the gas, which is a clean and cheap source of energy, to the peoples of the Caribbean. This pipeline could reach all the islands of the eastern Caribbean and even Cuba, this is a viable project, a study has been made, it will depend on the amount of the resources we are able to pump from the Atlantic waters in Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean itself.

This would provide enough energy to improve the living standards of the peoples of these southern countries in the first place.

These are some ideas of what we can do, instead of begging or preaching in the desert.

In the last 5 years – for example, I have heard many voices, mine included, saying:

- The international economic structure needs to be reformed.

We have repeated that assertion over and over again, I myself have repeated it throughout 2 years, but I no longer will, now I say:

We in the South must create our own financial structures. And they must be strong ones, because I am certain that the International Monetary Fund is not willing to change, not at all!

They believe they own the Olympus and they have the right to impose their criteria on the world, even if that brings about the world's destruction.

These are some of the ideas that we are discussing in Venezuela and other South American countries, and these ideas are gaining strength among the people, the intellectuals, the workers, the women, the social movements, political parties, parliaments.

Only then we will be able to promote these ideas with the required power and consistency, so that the world really starts to change.

If we leave the change of the world in the hands of the powerful, when Mars returns he will look at the Earth as if he were looking into a mirror. And we cannot let it happen.

Let me give you an example of what can be done in our countries, and allow me to take this opportunity to acknowledge the Cuban people and its leader,

Fidel, and to express my people's gratitude. We have also been talking about education. Education generates awareness. Bolivar said:

- "An ignorant people is a blind instrument for its own destruction".

And the problem of desertification has to be tackled first, as with poverty and hunger, by EDUCATION.

Fidel also emphasized this in his speech. Well, 4 month ago the Cuban government and the Venezuelan government started together an excellent plan.

Venezuela had more than 1 million illiterates. We are 23 millions and with usual procedures we could educate up to 20 thousand persons per year. So it would have been an endless process in the traditional way.

So we learned from the Cuban experience and applied a method called YES, I CAN developed here in Havana and then adjusted to the Venezuelan reality, with the help of Cuban technicians joined by Venezuelan volunteers, many of them very young, and with the cooperation of the Venezuelan Armed Forces that is contributing to the social work, side by side with the people, in conformity with the nation's will.

What seemed impossible was realized. After a three month preparation period, in response to a nationwide call and with Cuba's invaluable support, until yesterday 31 August when we came to Havana 880 thousand illiterate will start receiving lessons today, Monday.

This started on July 1st, so in only 2 months we have increased, from 15 thousand a year that was the average of the last decade, to 880 thousand illiterates attending classes in 56 thousand teaching centers not only at schools, but also in the country side, in camping areas, in the forest with the indigenous population, in the poor neighborhoods.

In each teaching facility we have a television set, some video players and two assistants prepared to help 15 countrymen in each classroom to learn how to read and write.

The first graduation is envisaged for September 8, the International Literacy Day. For the first time in our history that day we will graduate 100 thousand persons, and we expect to reach a total of one million by the end of the year.

In this regard we can say, Thanks Cuba for your support! And thanks to the great effort we have all made in Venezuela in one year we will put an end to a 200 year old problem. There will be no illiterates in Venezuela and they will learn not only to write their names, No! Again with Cuba's help we are developing another program, THE ROBINSON MISSION, so called in honor of the great Bolivarian Simón Rodríguez, and this SECOND STAGE will begin on October 28.

I have seen a 102 year old learning how to read and write, and 10 year old children who had never been to school, indigenous people learning to read and write in Spanish and in their native languages at the same time, because we in Venezuela give the indigenous languages the same level of recognition. The second stage will cover up to the sixth grade and then they will proceed to cover all elementary school. This is just an example, and this has cost us millions of dollars. But the monetary investment is not really the significant part.

The greatest investment, comrades, is the political one. This cannot be arranged in the marketplace, on the contrary, the market can only derange and destroy such projects. This can only be based on ETHICS, POLITICS, WILL POWER and COURAGE to maintain decisions, to implement a plan.

These are my thoughts for this SIXTH CONVENTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS AGAINST DESERTIFICATION.

I assure you, Arba Diallo, that I will keep my commitment, but what cannot happen again in Venezuela is another coup d'état. You may recall: When Chavez went to Geneva, a few month later he was overthrown!

Those who succeeded in that occasion will never succeed again.

So, be calm, brother and comrade, because our project in Venezuela is growing and getting stronger, not only for the benefit of our country but also as a modest contribution to the change of the world, with new ideas, new projects, roads full of trees, suns, and bushes, as dreamed by Rosinés (President Chavez' youngest daughter).

Two years ago in Geneva I ended my speech with an expression that came to my mind during the Millennium Summit, I will repeat it because I believe it is possible, with WILL, UNITY, BOLDNESS and COURAGE, now at the beginning of the new millennium, in spite of all the signs to the contrary, I believe a better, different, beautiful world is possible.

I hope the Earth never resembles Mars, though Mars is very handsome, the red planet!, but I hope our planet will never be like the Martian deserts, but like the little roads surrounded by trees and bushes.

I repeat once more, Mr. President, dear friends, now from Havana, with all my heart and affection:

LET'S SAVE THIS OUR WORLD!

Thank you very much.

(Applauses)