



Remarks by His Excellency,

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President of Gabon

**A climate and resource security dialogue for the 21st
century**

Lancaster House, London,
Thursday 22 - Friday 23 March 2012

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honoured to have been invited by the British Government to offer a few thoughts on the potential consequences of continued climate change for security in Africa.

It is a little acknowledged fact that Africa has been dealing with the consequences of climate change for thousands of years. Around 500 years Before Christ a phase of climate change sparked the mass movement of my people, the Bantu. When hot dry conditions resulted in environmental degradation and extensive forest fires, my ancestors were driven from their homeland to travel the length and breadth of Africa.

Today, our people are dispersed across the continent, creating one of the unique elements of African consciousness, with multiple shared histories and connections. Climate change is a security threat that Africans have had to deal with all of our lives.

As we look to the future, Africa is going to have to walk a tightrope if we are to achieve sustainable growth; for we cannot improve our living standards while simultaneously degrading the natural environment around us. We face the challenge of driving growth and prosperity for our people during a period of increasing environmental stress, much of which we can do little to combat.

This is the pre-eminent challenge in the 21st Century and is particularly relevant to Africa, where the confluence of rapid economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability will be at its clearest.

However, today's meeting is particularly significant because it confirms that climate change is recognised as a serious and credible threat to the security of nations the world over.

Analyzing climate change in the context of a security threat will change the nature of the debate globally. For many years we have discussed this issue in the context of its impact on sustainable development alone. The realities of global diplomacy mean that we must show the leading nations of the world that the effects of climate change will not be limited to the increased incidence of natural disasters, or changes in the structure of global agriculture.

They will extend into the proliferation of armed conflict that has the potential to impact all of us, not just those living in countries directly affected. Whether it is the cost, both financial and political, of increased military engagement in African conflicts, or the direct threat of increased Western focused African terrorism.

My active participation in His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales' Rainforest Project, my trip to Copenhagen in 2009 and the recent GEO meeting held in Libreville on water cycles in Africa have all reinforced my conviction that we will soon be faced by increasingly significant security challenges, as a result of global warming.

Indeed, in 2009, the Africa Progress Panel predicted that in the future: “climate change currently affecting Africa will cause armed conflicts in 23 countries and political unrest in another 13”. We are already seeing the seeds of this in the Sahel as Extremist terrorism continues to become an increasing threat.

Today rainfall and crops in the Sahel are failing, the Sahara is advancing to the south and Lake Chad, which is receding fast, will soon be little more than a distant memory. Will this be the source of the next mass movement of environmental refugees, leading to the destabilization of countries further south, such as my own? Will it lead to wars for access to scarce resources? Let us be clear – it will. As will poverty.

The resources over which we fight in the future will not be oil, gold and diamonds: the wars of the future will be fought over water, food and land. They will be fought because of the pressures exerted by a growing body of humanity on the natural world that sustains all of us and whose balance has been destabilized by the activities of one species – man.

If we truly want to avoid such bleak prospects in the future, we need to adhere to a strict respect of our environment today. Peace, Security and the Environment are inter-dependent. We cannot work for lasting peace if we don't confront today, the causes that we know will lead to wars in the future.

I believe in the concept of preventative diplomacy. Of recognizing the challenges of the future and taking action to stop them today. In no other area is this concept more important than in climate change, because its impact cannot be reversed through policy conceived too late.

Conserving our natural environment, while not limiting economic opportunities for our people; that is the global challenge today, a challenge fit for the 21st century; a challenge that requires new models of doing business; models which we all recognise are necessary, but which many of us still struggle to embrace.

Gabon is in a unique position today. We are rich in minerals, oil and gas, and yet our natural environment is still relatively pristine. We have internationally recognised experts at the frontline of environmental debates and we have the political will to find solutions and to engage in the necessary reforms to implement these solutions.

Over the last two years we have developed a plan to transform Gabon into an emerging nation by 2025. Our National Climate Change Action Plan - we call it the "Plan Climat" – has developed an approach to preserve the rain forests that cover 88% of our territory and to manage the emissions resulting from our industrial activities.

We have to integrate climate sensitivity and responsibility into all of our sectorial development strategies. The result is a low carbon development strategy that will be signed into law when complete.

In order to accelerate this work we have just restructured the government, creating a Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development. Our intention is clear – we intend to integrate the principal of sustainable, climate sensitive development into our national development strategy. We see the environment as a cross cutting issue that impacts the entire economy today, and feel that this will become more and more the case in the future.

My fellow Gabonese elected me on the basis of my commitment to find solutions to construct an “Emerging Gabon” by 2025.

As is the case elsewhere, our success will depend on our ability to build strong institutions, to promote good political, economic and environmental governance and to achieve sustainable growth, thereby improving the livelihoods of the Gabonese people. We need to shift our mind-set and start to consider the shock of climate change as a wake up call and opportunity to develop a new model of development and international cooperation.

I spoke earlier about the effects of climate change in Africa. These changes are accelerating because of the failure of the international community to take a united stand and address the issue holistically.

The Lake Chads of this World are a litmus test for us all. Will we be able to develop a new model for international cooperation and work in a spirit of solidarity to find solutions for those countries worst affected and least able to adapt to climate change?

Will we construct the binding and ambitious agreement the planet so desperately needs before the Kyoto Protocol fizzles out?

Or will we continue to head for disaster, doing too little too late?

For Gabon, the most difficult aspect of implementing the radical and important policies that we are working hard to deliver, is that without the partnership of others to do as we are doing, our efforts will have been in vain.

I strongly believe that it is imperative that the International Community wake-up and commit to a common strategy to combat climate change. We really need to focus on the ambition of restricting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees centigrade, rather than the 4 degrees that scientists currently predict is the business as usual scenario, and which will be truly catastrophic for many of us.

I am encouraged by the fact that the UK government has remained committed to an ambitious programme of climate change action despite the challenging economic context you face. I congratulate the government and your climate change negotiators on your engagement. I am also happy that our respective teams seem to have developed a healthy mutual respect and a constructive dialogue. I believe that this can serve as a model to breach the chasm of mistrust and self-interest that has paralysed the UNFCCC negotiations in the past.

Finally, allow me to reiterate my appreciation to the British government. It is meetings like this that allow us to confront differing viewpoints, with the aim of achieving a shared vision for the future of our planet. Let us work together to show leadership and to lead the world towards a stable future, for all of us.

Thank you.