

**Statement by
Dr. The Hon. Christopher Tufton, M.P., Minister of Agriculture, Jamaica
at the
High Level Conference on World Food Security: The Challenges of Climate Change
and Bioenergy**

June 2008

[Salutations]

Mr. Chairman,

May I begin by congratulating the FAO on its extraordinary foresight in organising this conference from as far back as last year, when the current crisis was less severe than it is presently, and when international focus on this issue was not as sharp. This speaks to the fact that the FAO is both in tune with and responsive to the world's realities.

As is well known, the world has been experiencing steep increases in food prices over the last several months, for reasons which are well known and documented. Additionally, there has been a dramatic rise in the cost of fuel and critical agricultural inputs including fertilizer and feedstock for livestock. What we are facing is in fact the first major crisis of global proportion in the 21st century. This food crisis has the potential to undermine all the Millennium Development Goals set by world leaders at the United Nations in 2000, moreso the target to halve extreme global poverty and hunger by 2015. Left unchecked, not only will we see an increase in the number of people suffering from hunger, but rural livelihoods will be undermined through a decline in agricultural production due to high input costs.

Mr. Chairman

We must only go back to the past to the extent that it can help us chart a better way forward by avoiding past mistakes. Within this context, I am constrained to lament the unfortunate neglect of the agricultural sector in the South in the past, in pursuit of "cheap" food imports. This approach miscalculated the strategic importance of agriculture to the notion of sovereignty. The reaction to the current food crisis by some

countries, reflected in export bans, underlines the instinctive tendency of nations to safeguard their own welfare first and foremost. The outbreak of food riots equally underscores the criticality of food to basic human existence. If nothing else therefore, Mr. Chairman, this crisis must redefine the strategic importance of agriculture and galvanize us to action.

Small, net-food importing developing countries like Jamaica are in a particularly precarious position, as we neither have the resources to continue importing food at these high prices, nor the capacity to rapidly increase production of foods in the short term. Given the prognosis of a persistence of high food prices over the next decade, the time has come for the international community to mount a response to this crisis akin to the Green Revolution in the aftermath of World War II. Our lack of capacity in research and development, poor infrastructure, and the predominance of small farmers with limited education and access to land, demand a concentrated and deliberate programme of development assistance to transform our agricultural sectors.

As a Small Island Developing State, our problems are further compounded beyond our capacity issues: we are particularly susceptible to extreme weather conditions precipitated by climate change. Adaptation to climate change and mitigation must now be mainstreamed into our agricultural policies and programmes. In our own case in Jamaica, we have been impacted by at least six severe weather episodes in the last 5 years, resulting in losses to the agricultural sector of nearly US\$200M. Therefore, as we seek to improve production and productivity, we must also build resilience, as we face the real threat annually of a significant portion of our production capacity being destroyed by adverse weather episodes. Food security and climate change are therefore inextricably linked.

Mr. Chairman,

There is every justification to explore alternative sources of energy given the explosion in world oil prices, not to mention the overwhelming desire to reduce carbon emissions. It is however not wise to create greater problems in attempting to solve one. There is no doubt

that the rapid and massive conversion of some food crops to fuels has negatively impacted food production. The two objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For instance, widescale use of sugar cane for ethanol is far more efficient and has far less impact on food availability than corn.

In Jamaica, we are dealing with this food crisis in 2 ways. On a national scale, we are expanding production in a number of indigenous crops capable of substituting a number of imported cereal and starches. This effort is being supported by increased research and development, extension service and low cost financing. At the household level, we are pursuing programmes, which seek to raise the consciousness of householders that they can play a part in reducing their food bill by growing some of the basic things they consume. Even as we do this, we are conscious that we will require technical support to increase production and productivity at a pace and to a level to change our profile of dependence on food imports to that of substantial food self sufficiency. Further, to take advantage of competitive export markets, support in developing niche marketing and branding, is necessary. This should all be underpinned by access to concessionary and grant financing, taking into account our debt profile.

In closing, Jamaica adds its voice to those calling for a speedy conclusion to the Doha Development Round. An outcome which sees real and effective cuts in subsidies, will make a major contribution, in the medium to long term, to the achievement of food self-sufficiency.

Thank you.