

**REMARKS OF RT. HON. RAILA ODINGA, PRIME
MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF KENYA DURING THE
TREE PLANTING CEREMONY AT KAPTUNGA FOREST,
MAU, 15-1-2010.**

Cabinet Ministers,

Development partners,

Friends of the Mau;

We gather here this morning in the name of our largest and most important water tower. Thank you for sparing time for this noble and life saving exercise.

It is less than a month since the entire world gathered at the city of Copenhagen to discuss steps to be taken to stem the tide of rising temperatures as a result of climate change.

Our country sent a high profile delegation to that conference with a moving tale of our year after year struggles with the devastation caused by changing weather patterns and the drain it is causing to our economy.

Kenya's story was seen to be the story of Africa and the Third World. It is the story of nations that have contributed the least to the emissions of toxic gases but are feeling the greatest impact of those emissions.

It is also the story of nations struggling to conserve their environments against growing pressure for more land for agricultural and industrial use.

It is now recognised that the accelerating destruction of the rainforests that form a cooling band around the Earth's Equator is one of the main causes of climate change.

The rampant slashing and burning of tropical forests is second only to the energy sector as a source of greenhouse gases that warm up our environment and change our climate patterns.

This is why we are here today.

That the Mau Forests Complex supports key economic sectors of our economy and that of the region is now public knowledge.

But the forest has continued to be degraded through irregular and illegal encroachments that have turned parts of what used to be lush bushes into barren land.

As we speak, the Mau has lost about 197,707 hectares to settlements, farmlands and charcoal burners in the last 15 years.

The excisions of 2001 saw the forest lose more than 61,000 hectares, leading to widespread hue and cry. The cries went unheeded and today, the damage is there e for all of us to see.

Let me remind you of the wise words of one statesman---former US President John F, Kennedy--- who said;

“Those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.”

As leaders, we cannot stand by and watch Kenya miss her future.

And there cannot be a greater benefit to confer on the next generation than addressing the environmental issues that have direct impact on our well-being.

That is why we are taking this first step to restore this forest. There will be many more steps to restore many more forests until this nation is at peace with its environment.

I have never been under any illusions on how complex the process of reclaiming our water towers is going to be.

I have always been aware that there are risks and costs to any program of action that proposes radical changes. But I am also aware that those risks and costs are far less than the long-term risks and costs of failing to act now.

As a nation, we must resist the temptation to continue with business as usual however easy or popular that option may be.

In seeking to conserve our forests, we are not against any man or woman, community or region except those unwilling to see this clear and present danger.

In coming here today, we are looking for a safer and sustainable future for our nation. That's all that we seek.

We recognize that hesitation and inaction will only visit more catastrophes on our land.

I am glad that a good number of Kenyans now see the link between the frequent and alternating droughts and floods and the destruction of our water towers.

But I am concerned that not enough people have internalized the urgency of the situation we have to confront.

We must accept that we cannot continue destroying our environment then sit back, hoping that somehow, it will replenish itself.

I appeal to my fellow countrymen and women to practice the humility that our natural world asks of us if it is to serve us.

Our ancestors, living in what was regarded as the Dark Age always understood that human beings, however educated, sophisticated, rich or poor, ultimately answer to the natural environment.

They understood that the natural environment has its rules by which it serves or fail to serve us and simply breaks down.

We don't have the luxury of debating the linkages between food security, energy security, economic growth and environmental protection.

That protecting our forests is our best safeguard against drought, food and power shortages is a tested scientific fact. Nobody has

proved that we can cut down our trees for farming, settlement and charcoal, and still get enough rain for our electricity, our livestock and our crops.

We must all accept that degrading the environment then talking of pursuing food security is a risky contradictory game that we cannot afford.

The more we argue over side issues; who is more generous, or caring or kind, the more the forests get destroyed and the more we will have none to save by the time we reach an agreement.

This is no longer a question of if we should do it. It is a question of how; and today, we take the first practical, collective step in addressing that how.

It is the first step in a journey that will see us plant over 7.6 billion trees and increase our forest cover to 10 per cent by 2020. I am confident that Kenyans shall never walk alone on this journey.

But we must be in this together as Kenyans. Only then will we attract meaningful support of our development partners.

We must see this as our greatest challenge, our greatest priority and our greatest opportunity.

I thank you.