

In the Sahel region of Africa, Canada funds war and de-funds drought research

Wednesday 3 April 2013, by [ANNIS Roger](#), [Council of Canadians](#), [Globe and Mail](#), [HARPER Tim](#), [YORK Geoffrey](#) (Date first published: 31 March 2013).

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The Sahel region of Africa is facing disastrous drought conditions driven by changing climate patterns. It's the band of semi-desert region that lies below the Sahara Desert and stretches from one side of Africa to the other. Average rainfall compared to the 1950s is down by fifty per cent. Compounding the crisis are bad agricultural practices and the disappearance of tree and shrub cover. All this has caused the Sahel region to steadily expand southward. The Sahara Desert itself, meanwhile, is also growing, according to some scientific estimates by as much as 48 square kilometers per year. Some 23 million people in eight African countries are facing severe food shortages.

Mali is one of the countries in the Sahel region that has been severely affected. Hundreds of thousands of people have been driven from their villages or pastoral settings into refugee camps because of disappearing rains.

The Canadian government's response to the crisis in the Sahel has been twofold. On the one hand, it has joined the United States in militarizing the region, responding to a largely fictional, "terrorism" scenario in order to bolster efforts for the new, colonial land and resource grab of Africa. On the other, it has provided pittance in aid money, including \$350,000 annually to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

Now the government has pulled out of that drought convention. See the comprehensive dossier below on the subject.

In the refugee camps in Mali and along its borders, the number of people who are there due to drought far exceeds the numbers caused by the political and military conflict in recent years. Yet the government and mainstream media in Canada have largely conflated the two, in favor of the former, causing the drought crisis to "disappear" in favor of the "terrorism" crisis.

Roger Annis, March 31, 2013

Our credibility is high and dry after UN pullout from anti-drought group

By Tim Harper, columnist, page one, *Toronto Star*, 29 Mar 2013

OTTAWA— Once again Canada stands alone. In 2011, the Conservative government became the first to formally withdraw from the United Nations' Kyoto Protocol on the environment. Now, we have become the first nation to withdraw from the UN's convention on drought, a program primarily aiming to help East Africa and the Sahel region.

Another 193 nations and the European Union believe this UN program has value in trying to prevent drought and its fallout, which includes malnourishment, child malnutrition and problems with cross-border refugees.

Our government has neither the time nor the money nor the interest in dealing with such issues. "It's inexplicable," says Oxfam executive director Robert Fox. The move, which apparently was never to be announced, is couched in the disdainful language Stephen Harper and his government use in describing the United Nations, suggesting the Canadian contribution was paying for bureaucratic salaries and meetings, or what Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird called "a talkfest."

The prime minister said only 18 per cent of the money Canada contributes to the convention is used on programming. But these high-minded declarations about protecting the Canadian taxpayer ring false when one considers the Canadian contribution was a mere \$350,000 per year.

To save some pocket change the government has again embarrassed itself with its latest foray into international isolationism. And this time there is a direct link to important domestic policy. In making this decision, the Conservatives have given the back of their hand to their own base of support in Alberta.

At a time when a parade of federal ministers (including Baird) and provincial premiers, including Alberta Premier Alison Redford, have been invading Washington to tout this country's supposed "green credentials" in a bid to win presidential approval for the final phase of the Keystone XL pipeline, a decision like this simply blows up all that work. Walking away from a convention that is dealing with a problem that has been at least accelerated by climate change reinforces the world's view, including a widely held view in Washington, that the Harper government is all about resource development and exports, barely paying lip service to climate change.

It is consistent with this government's view of the UN. Harper snubbed the General Assembly last year, his government has never accepted a single criticism from the international body and has all but chased UN rapporteurs out of the country.

This UN-phobia may have all been foreshadowed in a speech Harper delivered at the Conservative convention shortly after winning his 2011 majority but it is an abrupt turnaround from comments Harper made in Africa a mere five months ago. Then, he committed \$20 million in Canadian aid to the Sahel while visiting a UN centre in Dakar. "Across the Sahel region of Africa, there are many problems, including millions of men, women and children who are suffering because they do not have enough to eat," Harper said. "I know I speak for all Canadians when I tell you we will not abandon you."

A day before this news broke, Julian Fantino, the minister responsible for the Canadian International Development Agency, promised, in a *Globe and Mail* op-ed, that Canada would remain "a compassionate neighbour. We are known to lend a helping hand to those suffering the ill effects of cyclical drought, weak governance or an earthquake."

In the Sahel, an estimated 18.7 million people are malnourished, including a million children at the risk of severe malnutrition. The Canadian move comes on the eve of an April 9 UN meeting bringing scientists, governments and civil society organizations together in Bonn. It is billed as the first ever cost-benefit analysis of desertification, land degradation and drought. We're not coming.

Three days ago, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry announced an additional \$51 million in humanitarian assistance to the people of the Sahel, citing a "complex crisis of drought, flooding, failed harvests, and disrupted livelihoods."

Baird pulled us out of the UN program trying to prevent it. Wonder how green we look to Kerry now?

DROUGHT, two articles in the *Globe and Mail*

Science will help save Africa

By Geoffrey York, *The Globe and Mail*, 29 Mar 2013

In the villages outside Kaya in northern Burkina Faso, the millet crop withered and died in the devastating drought that swept the country last year, and the farmers were forced to scrounge for food. I found them in the local hospital, where their children were struggling for life.

"We eat only one meal a day," Arzouma Tindano told me. "Sometimes we go to the bush to collect wild leaves." The wild leaves weren't enough to feed his family. His 18-month-old daughter, Teni, was on the verge of death. They brought her to Kaya hospital, where she was attached to an intravenous drip and a nasal feeding tube. The nurses said it was almost impossible to find a vein in the child's emaciated body.

The rainfall at Mr. Tindano's farm was less than half of the normal level last year. It was the third major drought in the Sahel region of West Africa in less than a decade, and it triggered one of the world's biggest humanitarian emergencies, with 23 million people facing serious food shortages across eight African countries.

To respond to the crisis, the Harper government sent \$57.5-million in aid to the Sahel region last year, and ordinary Canadians donated another \$7-million. But these kinds of emergency aid donations might be unnecessary if scientists could find ways to prevent droughts in Africa – a key goal of a United Nations convention on desertification and drought, from which the Canadian government has now withdrawn.

The decision to pull out of the UN drought convention has shocked many people in the African aid sector. "It's a dangerous game to be playing," said an official at UNICEF, the UN children's agency.

Joanna Kerr, a Canadian who is chief executive of ActionAid, a leading global anti-poverty organization with its international headquarters in Johannesburg, said the withdrawal from the UN convention will further damage Canada's credibility and voice in Africa. "Wherever I travel in Africa," she said, "people ask me, 'what happened to Canada?'"

In impoverished countries like Burkina Faso, drought has become a chronic phenomenon, and it is difficult to see how the droughts can be beaten without scientific research on issues such as climate change, desertification and overgrazing. Rainfall has declined by nearly 50 per cent in the Sahel since 1954, with disastrous consequences for millions of people.

In Kenya, proud Masai herdsman watched thousands of their cattle die in front of them in a drought in 2009. They told me that the droughts have mysteriously increased in recent years. They trudged 150 kilometres to the slopes of Mount Kenya in a desperate effort to find food for their cattle, but it was not enough to save their cows. "Every day they die," herdsman John Lenyarwa told me. "We have no hope."

Drought is connected to many of Africa's most catastrophic emergencies. In war-torn Somalia, drought has killed far more children than military clashes or terrorist bombs. When drought turned to famine in 2011, tens of thousands of Somali children perished. More than half of Somalia's entire population were in famine zones that year.

At the peak of Somalia's famine, I watched malnourished children slip silently into death at a Mogadishu hospital, even as thousands of families continued to arrive at the city's refugee camps to flee the famine. In one hospital room, Khadijo Mumin wailed with grief. The doctors were unable to save her son, Ahmed Nur, who was attached to an intravenous tube. Two of her five children were dead, and two more were on the brink of death, lying weakly in the same room. "I'm losing all my children now," she cried.

In one of the most arid Sahel nations, Chad, the desert is steadily expanding and the rain is disappearing. One of Africa's biggest lakes, Lake Chad, is dramatically shrinking. It has lost 95 per cent of its size since the 1960s, partly because of climate change. The region around the lake was once the breadbasket of the country, but crops have declined by 40 to 60 per cent since the late 1990s.

I talked to Halime Djime, a nomadic camel-herder whose family lost its camels in a recent drought. Two of her four children had died, and her painfully thin daughter, Fatime, was receiving emergency aid at a feeding centre in a village in Chad.

Ms. Djime was bewildered by the increasing severity of the droughts. "I've never seen this before," she told me. "Even when there were no trees, there would be vegetation. This is the first time that the land is all white."

Why Canada chose to leave an international fight against desertification (and other questions)

By *Globe staff*, Thursday, March 29, 2013

What is the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification?

Essentially, it is an agreement through which countries agreed to set up a program to find ways to stop the spread of droughts that lay waste to farmland across the planet, particularly in Africa. Canada signed the convention in 1994 and ratified it in 1995, and 194 countries and the European Union are currently a party to it.

The UN is holding a major scientific gathering in Bonn next month at which scientists, governments and civil society organizations are "to carry out the first ever comprehensive costbenefit analysis of desertification, land degradation and drought," says a notice from the United Nations Environment Program. "Also, for the very first time, governments will provide concrete data on the status of

poverty and of land cover in the areas affected by desertification in their countries.”

The issue of encroaching deserts has become urgent because of renewed droughts that have plunged millions into poverty in Africa’s Sahel belt last year and in East Africa the year before.

When did the government decide to withdraw? How much does it cost?

The federal cabinet last week ordered the withdrawal on the recommendation of Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird. Canada served one-year written notice on the United Nations on Monday [March 26].

A spokeswoman for the Canadian International Development Agency confirmed that Canada will follow through on its funding commitments for the next year and “will pay its contribution of \$315,000 for 2013.”

The government also said Thursday it would not take part in next month’s meeting in Bonn. “While CIDA is still a member until the end of 2013, Canada is not planning to participate in this meeting,” said spokeswoman Amy Mills.

Why is Canada withdrawing?

Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Thursday that the program has proven too bureaucratic, with less than one-fifth of the money Canada contributes to the convention going to programming.

“Eighteen per cent of the funds that we send it are actually spent on programming,” Mr. Harper said during Question Period. “The rest goes to various bureaucratic measures.... It’s not an effective way to spend taxpayers’ money.”

Mr. Baird branded the whole process a “talkfest” that does a disservice to Canadian taxpayers. What has the reaction been? Not surprisingly, there has been a backlash from environmentalists, who believe the Harper government to be an outlier on climatechange policy in past international meetings. “Anything that they’re involved in that can lead to more evidence that we’re a planet in crisis environmentally they don’t want to be part of,” said Maude Barlow, head of the Council of Canadians and the author of a forthcoming book on global droughts. “They simply do not want this information coming forward.”

Robert Fowler, a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, said Canada’s abandonment of the convention amounts to a “departure from global citizenship.”

“It has taken climate-change denial, the abandonment of collective efforts to manage global crises and disregard of the pain and suffering of the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa (among many others) to quite a different level,” Mr. Fowler said in an e-mail. Mr. Fowler ridiculed Mr. Baird’s common refrain on foreign policy that Canada isn’t interested in “going along to get along.”

“No, by jingo, we’re not going to go along to get along! Such vainglorious nose-thumbing at the international community’s efforts to tame a very present threat to hundreds of millions of the world’s poorest and most desperate people is nothing short of incomprehensible.”

Former Liberal environment minister Stéphane Dion said the government cannot take any meaningful steps to combat the encroachment of deserts when it is outside an international process that includes every other country on the planet. “How can you improve something when all the countries that are working on it together are around the table except you?” said Mr. Dion. “It’s [desertification] affecting Canada as well, in the Prairies. Climate change will make it even worse. It would exist without man-made climate change.”

What has Ottawa's attitude been in the past?

The Conservative government has previously expressed enthusiastic support for the UN convention, which is known by the acronym CCD. "Canada actively supports the CCD by taking practical steps to assist developing countries in addressing the problem of desertification," Josée Verner, the international co-operation minister at the time, said in a 2007 statement.

In the same statement, Ms. Verner touted a \$4.7-million project by CIDA on "climate change adaptation capacity support" for several African countries, including the semi-arid Sahel region, which spans the continent. A CIDA progress report said the project achieved "better understanding of the impacts of climate change on the management of the natural resources in the Sahel."

Funding for the project ended in 2010, a CIDA document says. The government moved CIDA into the Foreign Affairs Department in last week's budget.

Harper government knows "earth's future" depends on "combating desertification," doesn't seem to care

By Council of Canadians, March 28, 2013

Compounding an already controversial decision to pull out of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the Harper government's previous statements are raising even more questions.

Contradicting the government's current claims that the treaty showed "few results", in June 2007 federal cabinet minister Josée Verner said "earth's future" depends on "combating desertification," calling it "one of the key challenges to environmental sustainability".

The comments were made in a statement on the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, which marks the anniversary of the adoption of the UNCCD. Verner was Minister of International Cooperation at the time. Vernier also said in the statement, "This World Day allows us to highlight the importance of dryland-related issues and the fact that desertification is a global concern. This day also reminds us we can effectively combat desertification through greater community involvement and cooperation at all levels."

The CIDA website still highlights the importance of the UNCCD and calls land degradation "an environmental sustainability priority" for the federal government.

"This confirms Harper knows how important this treaty is, but is abandoning it anyway," said Barlow. "Is Harper pulling out of this treaty in the hope that doing so removes a key international legal instrument at a time when First Nations are increasingly challenging the legal legitimacy of his government's legislation, especially in relation to tar sands, mining, and omnibus legislation?"

The UNCCD is the only legally binding treaty in the world on desertification. Canada is now the only country not a party to it.

"Given that the UNCCD has been run out of CIDA, which the 2013 federal budget folded into DFAIT

to align it with corporate interests, we need to ask who benefits from this decision,” said Barlow. “This government is a total enabler of Canadian mining companies destroying local water systems in Latin America and other places. This is a huge story in its larger context.”

“Drought and desertification are growing in over 100 countries. We are relentlessly damming and diverting water for the global food trade and over pumping groundwater at a rate that doubles every 20 years,” said Barlow. “Water sources are drying up in many parts of the world. This is simply the worst signal Canada could make to the global community and it comes at the worst time. It is shameful the Harper government would pull out of this crucial negotiation.”

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<http://www.rogerannis.com/in-the-sahel-region-of-africa-canada-funds-war-and-de-funds-drought-research/>