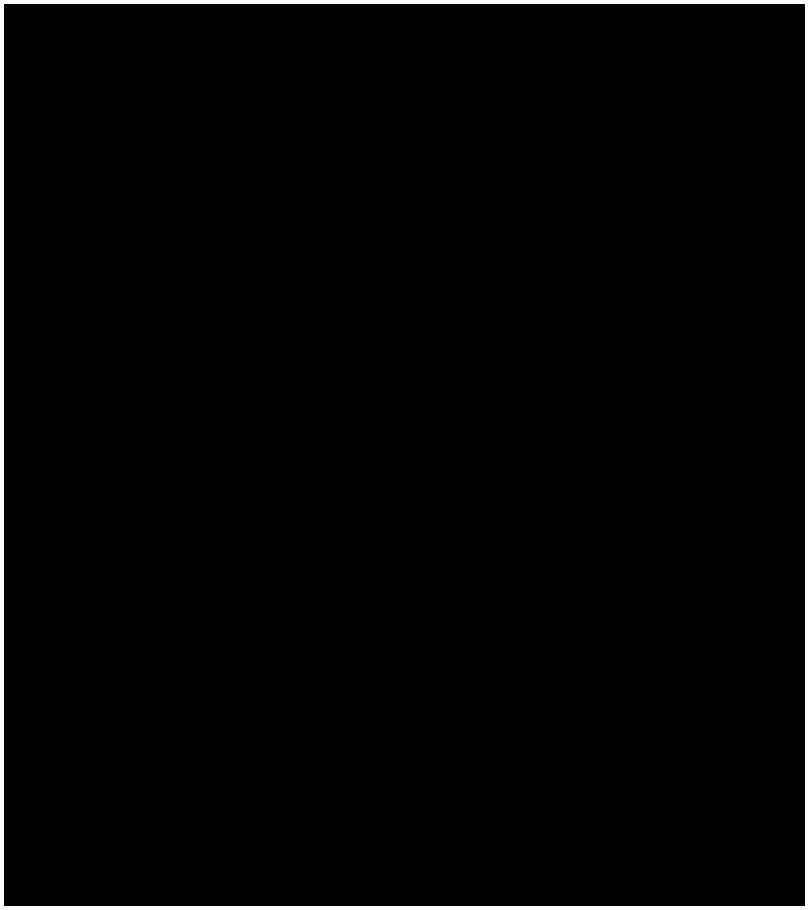

The desert is not an organism that spread its tentacles to swallow up land and objects in its path. This is the image we generally have of the desert when we speak of the advance or spreading of the Sahara Desert. The process by which an area becomes a desert is known as desertification. This process can happen in an area that is not contiguous to an existing desert. In other words, an area that is not close to an existing desert can become one through the process of desertification.

Desertification is one of the key environmental challenges facing Nigeria and indeed all of sub-Saharan Africa. It has been estimated that the desert area is increasing at the rate of more than half a kilometre every year, and that about 35 million Nigerians are directly affected by this menace. Eleven states in Nigeria, sometimes called the frontline states, are under threat of desertification. These states include Bauchi, Borno, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe, Zamfara, and parts of Gombe, and Jigawa.

Obviously, the problem of desertification has global implications and that is why we have the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) that was launched in 1994 and became operational three years later. Although a majority of nations have ratified the

convention, only a handful have undertaken programmes towards the attainment of its objectives. For example, Nigeria took steps in this direction in 2001 when the National Action Programme (NAP) on desertification was launched. Nigeria also has a number of other initiatives: National Grains Reserve Programme; Drought Management Policy; Desert-to-Food Policy; and the National Desertification Policy. A question that comes to mind is how well are these policies and programmes being run?

Generally, Nigeria s most visible actions to fight desertification have largely been about organising yearly tree planting exercises. The planting of trees is a good step and should be encouraged. The sad fact is that tree planting alone is not enough to stop desertification from taking place.

We must look at the factors that encourage desertification. Without much investigation, it is obvious that global warming has a major impact on this process. Other factors include bush burning, inappropriate grazing, and poor irrigation systems.

Going back to the contribution of global warming to this phenomenon informs us that Nigeria faces a peculiar risk of being swallowed up by two migrating forces water from rising sea levels, and sand from increased desertification. Some of the impacts of global warming include droughts as well as freak rains. Even with the unpredictable rainfall patterns, Northern Nigeria still has much less rain than the South. The lack of rain directly encourages desertification, as already stated. Along the coastal fringe of Nigeria, the big challenge is that of sea level rise. When we talk of sea level rise, it is vital to keep in mind that the Niger Delta, for example, is a naturally subsiding environment. With this in mind, it has been estimated that if a net sea level rise of one metre occurs, up to 100 kilometres from the Atlantic shore will go under water.

The implication of this is that our economy, food systems, security, and livelihoods are severely threatened by the impacts of global warming. This is an issue that should be taken as a serious matter of emergency and should be tackled holistically, and not by seasonal, episodic responses.

One of the most visible issues relating to desertification in Nigeria is the shrinkage of Lake Chad. This lake has shrunk by up to 90% since the past 50 years and we can suggest here that the fortunes of Lake Chad should be taken as a measure of progress made by our country since political independence was attained 50 years ago. Lake Chad has shrunk from an area of 25,000 square kilometres to a paltry 1,500 square kilometres. Experts believe that at its present

rate of shrinkage, Lake Chad may become dry land within the next 20 years.

The drying up of Lake Chad and other water bodies is not a mere geographic reality. It means increasing loss of livelihood, increasing water scarcity, and a veritable pusher of poverty. Moreover, the drying of the lake and persisting desertification portend staggering prospects for our nation. With the understanding that the Sahara is not marching but that desertification occurs autonomously, we can take steps to halt this process that allows sands to swallow our land. The implication of the drying of Lake Chad is already obvious in the displacement of fishermen, pastoralists, and others who depend on its water. The future is bleak, unless the root causes of this phenomenon is tackled. It may even be the case that the recurring land crises in the middle belt can be traced to the environment displacement of populations in these areas and the religious colouration may well be convenient cover for perpetrators of intolerance.

We repeat here that mere trees cannot stop desertification. Indeed, the trees we plant require enormous amounts of water to thrive, although we can use drought resistant species. You can imagine how much land cover can be achieved by simply planting drought resistant shrubs!

We will end this piece by returning to the issue of global warming as a major contributor to desertification. Reflect on the fact that global warming is caused by the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. There is one industrial complex that releases massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere on a daily basis. We are talking about the gas flares in the oil fields of the Niger Delta. If Nigeria is serious about tackling the issue of desertification, one of the immediate first steps is to stop the activity of gas flaring that have been illegal since 1984.

If we continue to stoke the atmosphere with greenhouse gasses through gas flaring in the South and keep planting a tree belt with the intention of halting desertification in the North, we are clearly wasting salt on porcupine intestine. It will remain a bitter tale.