

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

**MESSAGE ON THE WORLD DAY TO COMBAT
DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT**

17 June 2003

Desertification and drought pose an ever-increasing global threat. Human activities such as overcultivation, overgrazing, deforestation and poor irrigation practices, along with climate change, are turning once fertile soils into unproductive and barren patches of land. Arable land per person is shrinking throughout the world, threatening food security, particularly in poor rural areas, and triggering humanitarian and economic crises.

All parts of the world are affected. Last year's drought in Australia was the worst in more than a century, during which millions of tons of productive topsoil blew away in dust storms, crippling crop production and exports. Every year in India, dry spells and deforestation turn 2.5 million hectares into wasteland, while elsewhere in Asia, sandstorms are becoming a growing threat to the economy and the environment. Some 70 percent of all land in Mexico is vulnerable to desertification, prompting 700,000 to 900,000 Mexicans to leave their homes every year in search of a better living as migrant workers in the United States. But nowhere is the problem of desertification more acute than in sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of environmental refugees is expected to rise to 25 millions in the next 20 years.

The theme of this year's observance of the World Day To Combat Desertification and Drought is "sustainable water resource management schemes", highlighting the issue of water scarcity and the need for better water conservation and management. Since the adoption of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification nine years ago today, numerous projects have been initiated, despite limited resources, to address these and related concerns. At last year's World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the international community reaffirmed its commitment to the Convention, and recognized the need to give it new momentum through greater financial support.

Because the poor often farm degraded land that is increasingly unable to meet their needs, desertification is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Fighting desertification must therefore be an integral part of our wider efforts to eradicate poverty and ensure long-term food security. Let us today recommit ourselves to the goals of the Convention, and to achieving sustainable development for all, including in the dryland rural areas where the world's poorest people live.