

Global desertification, affecting one fifth of world's population, one of most serious threats facing humanity, says Secretary-General on world day.

Following is UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's message on the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought 2006, observed 17 June:

Desertification -- the loss of the land's biological productivity in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas -- is one of the most serious threats facing humanity. It is a global problem, affecting one fifth of the world's population in more than 100 countries. And it has far-reaching consequences. In a terrible spiral, it is partly caused by poverty, and exacerbates it. Together with other problems, it leads to forced migration from impoverished rural areas to cities that are themselves often ill-equipped to adequately shelter and employ new arrivals. If we don't take action, current trends suggest that by 2020 an estimated 60 million people could move from desertified areas of sub-Saharan Africa towards North Africa and Europe, and that worldwide, 135 million people could be placed at risk of being uprooted.

At the same time, there is also an urgent need to safeguard deserts themselves. Deserts are vital ecosystems. They have also been home to some of the world's most ancient and culturally rich civilizations, stretching over thousands of miles, from the legendary Mesopotamian Fertile Crescent to the regions of the Silk Road and the arid ecosystems of Latin America. The theme of this year's observance, "The beauty of deserts -- the challenge of desertification", celebrates this unique yet fragile heritage, and draws attention to the need to protect it.

This observance also coincides with the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, and with the tenth anniversary of the entry into force of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, which plays an important role in efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development and the Millennium Development Goals. On this World Day, let us resolve to step up the implementation of the Convention, and to work for more concerted efforts to address land degradation and desertification.