

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

MESSAGE ON WORLD DAY TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT
17 June 2002

Desertification and drought pose a worldwide threat with serious economic, environmental and socio-political implications.

Every year, an estimated \$42 billion in income and 6 million hectares of productive land are being lost because of desertification, land degradation and declining agricultural productivity, and 135 million people who depend primarily on land for their livelihood are at risk of being displaced.

The fallout is felt on all continents. In Africa, over the next 20 years some 60 million people are expected to move from the Sahelian region to less hostile areas if the desertification of their land is not halted. In northeast Asia, dust- and sandstorms have buried human settlements and forced schools and airports to shut down. In the Americas, dry spells and sandstorms have alarmed farmers and raised the spectre of another “Dust Bowl”, reminiscent of the 1930s. And in southern Europe, lands once green and rich in vegetation are turning barren and brown.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), adopted eight years ago today, integrates environmental and developmental concerns and thus is a key instrument not only in protecting ecosystems and resources, but also in alleviating poverty. However, a lack of predictable financial resources has hampered implementation. I urge developed countries to follow through on the commitments they made both in adopting the Convention and at the “Earth Summit” ten years ago in Rio de Janeiro -- including the provision of financial support through the Global Environment Facility (an alliance of the UN Development Programme, the UN Environment Programme and the World Bank), which should serve as a financial mechanism of the convention.

Desertification will be among the most important issues to be discussed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which opens in less than three months. We need to find ways to halt land degradation, and to manage land more responsibly. We need to reverse the decline in agricultural productivity, especially in Africa, so that food production keeps pace with the number of mouths to feed. We need, in short, to implement the UN Convention to Combat Desertification as a key element in the world’s quest for sustainable development.

Kofi A. Annan