

United Nations UNIES

The Secretary-General message on world Day to combat desertification and drought

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Desertification and land degradation affect one third of the Earth's surface, threatening the livelihoods, well-being and development of as many as 1 billion people. Faced with long periods of drought, famine and deepening poverty, many have only one option: flight from the land. There are already an estimated 24 million environmentally induced migrants. That number could rise to 200 million by 2050.

This year's observance of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought highlights the growing threat to national and regional stability posed by desertification. Nearly one-third of the world's cropland has become unproductive and been abandoned in the past 40 years. Almost three-quarters of rangelands show various symptoms of desertification. Climate change is a contributing factor, but not the only one. In particular, we must reconsider our agricultural practices and how we manage our water resources. Agriculture and the raising of livestock account for 70 per cent of freshwater use and as much as 80 per cent of deforestation. Growing demand for crops for animal feed and biofuels will put further pressure on these scarce resources if not managed sustainably.

Current global consumption and production patterns are unsustainable. The consequences will include further global food crises, such as we saw in 2008, and continued desertification, land degradation and periods of drought. As usual, the poor will be the first victims and the last to recover.

The recently concluded seventeenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development stressed that desertification and land degradation are global problems that require a global response. In December, world leaders can provide such a response when they meet in Copenhagen to seal a deal on climate change. A comprehensive and equitable agreement to slow down global warming must also help developing countries to adapt to the impacts that are already under way. In particular, it must provide adequate and predictable financing to support improved land management, more efficient water use and sustainable agriculture.

On this World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, let us recognize the security risks of letting desertification advance unchecked. Let us also recognize that by combating climate change we can help to reverse desertification, increase agricultural productivity, alleviate poverty and enhance global security.