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## PRESS RELEASE

### **UN Marks June 17 World Day to Combat Desertification**

#### **One fifth of the world's population under threat from desertification – impact felt beyond the borders of directly affected countries**

Bonn, Germany, 14 June 2006 - The devastating consequences of desertification can be seen and felt all over the world. About 3.6 billion of the world's 5.2 billion hectares of dryland used for agriculture have suffered erosion and soil degradation. Topsoil is painfully slow to form, but can be destroyed terrifyingly fast. An estimated 24 billion tons are blown or washed away each year, meaning it is being lost at least 16 times faster than it can be replaced. As topsoil is destroyed, livelihoods are lost. A fifth of the world's population is under threat.

Desertification can also have a serious impact far beyond the borders of directly affected countries. Sandstorms triggered in China affect not only the Korean peninsula and Japan, but are blowing dust particles across the Pacific, contributing to health problems. Forced migration and potential for inter-state conflict add to the urgency of the problem.

The World Day to Combat Desertification, in this International Year of Deserts and Desertification, is a double reminder of the scope and seriousness of the challenge.

This year's World Day also has a double theme: "The Beauty of Deserts – the Challenge of Desertification". It reflects the important distinction between deserts as a unique ecosystem on the one hand, and desertification, or the loss of the land's biological productivity, on the other. It thus serves two distinct purposes: to celebrate the richness and cultural diversity of our deserts, which deserve protection, while highlighting the need to combat desertification as a global sustainable development challenge.

The statistics belie the complacency with which the issue of desertification is often treated. While desertification costs the economy US\$42 billion a year, the human cost is incalculable. Some 135 million people - the combined populations of France and Germany – are at risk of being displaced. It has been the catalyst for a number of conflicts in arid lands in recent years and

the situation is set to get worse as burgeoning populations compete for diminishing vital resources such as land and water. Desertification has been identified by NATO as posing a serious threat to security in the Mediterranean region.

There is also an inextricable link between desertification and poverty. According to the Millennium Assessment report released last year, “desertification is potentially the most threatening ecosystem change impacting livelihoods of the poor.’

Currently, approximately 1.2 billion people, or one in every five of the world’s population, lives in extreme poverty. Approximately two-thirds of these are in rural areas, a large majority of them depending on agriculture for their daily subsistence. Combating desertification can therefore contribute significantly to a reduction in global poverty, thereby playing a crucial role in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

The drylands do offer tangible economic opportunities. It is estimated that every dollar invested in fighting land degradation and desertification may conservatively generate over three dollars in economic benefits, thus helping to fight poverty among the millions living on fragile lands.

The World Day to Combat Desertification is a reminder that desertification is not a fatality. Solutions exist and with collective effort can be put into practice.

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**Note to journalists:** For further information please contact the press office on (+49-228) 815 2857 or send an e-mail to [press\(at\)unccd.int](mailto:press(at)unccd.int) or visit: <http://www.unccd.int>