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HEADLINE: Vital need to protect most fragile of habitats

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BODY:

THE THEME of this year's observance of World Environment Day - Don't Desert Drylands - reminds us all, in the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, of the importance of caring for the world's vast areas of arid and semi-arid land.

Drylands are found in all regions, cover more than 40 per cent of the Earth and are home to nearly two billion people - one- third of the world's population.

For most dryland dwellers, life is hard and the future often precarious. They live on the ecological, economic and social margins.

Across the planet, poverty, unsustainable land management and climate change are turning drylands into deserts, and desertification in turn exacerbates and leads to poverty.

It is estimated that between 10 and 20 per cent of drylands are already degraded. The problem is particularly acute in sub- Saharan Africa and South Asia, where dryland degradation is a serious obstacle to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and is jeopardising efforts to ensure environmental sustainability.

These goals, which the world's governments have pledged to achieve by 2015, are essential components of a broader commitment to achieve a more secure future for humankind.

There is also mounting evidence that dryland degradation and competition over increasingly scarce resources can bring communities into conflict.

Desertification is hard to reverse, but it can be prevented.

Protecting and restoring drylands will not only relieve the growing burden on the world's urban areas, it will contribute to a more peaceful and secure world. It will also help to preserve landscapes and cultures that date back to the dawn of civilization and are an essential part of our cultural heritage.

On this World Environment Day, in the 10th anniversary year of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, I urge governments and communities everywhere to focus on the challenges of life on the desert margins, so the people who live there can look forward to a future of peace, health and social progress.

Kofi Annan is the United Nations Secretary-General

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