

UN experts call for early warning system to deal with rising number of sand, dust storms



Approaching dust storm

25 September 2009 – The rise in the number of devastating sand and dust storms around the world, such as the one to strike eastern Australia this week, has prompted United Nations experts to call for the creation of an early warning system to help countries deal with the potentially deadly storms.

The suspended particles in the atmosphere resulting from sand storms can affect global warming and spread disease, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (**UNCCD**) said in a news release issued on Thursday, when the body's annual two-day conference wrapped up in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

UNCCD said that there is a high probability that meningitis in Africa and Valley Fever in the Americas is associated with sand and dust weather. Meningitis in the sub-Saharan belt is one of the most feared epidemics in Africa with high fatality rates and brain damage being common.

"Policy-makers need to know the source of disease outbreaks, whether they are due to airborne or human transport, and to take actions to minimize risk to health and agriculture," said World Meteorological Organization (**WMO**) expert Robert Stefanski.

"Present capabilities to provide effective climate services fall far short of the needs in developing countries and must be improved," added Mr. Stefanski. "Long-term drought in Australia and its recent sand and dust storms highlight the risk to the world."

Media reports said that a storm this week dumped millions of tons of dust over New South Wales before heading north to Queensland, and could cost industry and agriculture millions of dollars.

Underscoring the need for countries to better deliver timely and quality forecasts of sand and dust storms amid signs that desertification is gathering pace in some regions, UNCCD

expert Yang Youlin said that land “degradation and sand encroachment in China has expanded to 3,436 square kilometres per year during the 1990s and early 2000s.”

In China alone, dust and sand storms originate from a total area of about 1 million square kilometres, and as much as much as 330,000 tons of sand fell on Beijing in a single night in 2006, noted UNCCD.

News Tracker: past stories on this issue

Guinea's humanitarian needs remain unmet following recent floods, UN reports