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Desert cities living on borrowed time

Temperatures soar and the available water is used up or turns salty

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LONDON The 500 million persons who live in the world's desert regions can expect to find life increasingly unbearable as already high temperatures soar and the available water is used up or turns salty, according to the United Nations.

Desert cities in the U.S. and West Asia, such as Phoenix and Riyadh, may be living on borrowed time as water tables drop and supplies become undrinkable, says a report coinciding with the World Environment Day.

Twentieth-century modernist dreams of greening deserts by diverting rivers and mining underground water are wholly unrealistic, it warns. But the report also proposes that deserts become the powerhouses of the next century, capturing solar energy and potentially exporting electricity across continents. For instance, an 803-sqkm area of the Sahara could, with today's technology, generate enough electricity for the whole world.

The problem now facing many communities on the fringes of deserts, says the U.N.

Environment Programme report, is not the physical growth of deserts but that rising water tables beneath irrigated soils are leading to more salinisation — a phenomenon already taking place across large tracts of China, India, Pakistan and Australia. The Tarm river basin in China, it says, has lost more than 13,000 sq km of farmland to salinisation in a period of 30 years.

The report suggests that West Asian countries such as Saudi Arabia have used water from the desert very unwisely. Rather than growing staple crops such as wheat or* tomatoes, it suggests that precious water should be used only for high value crops such as dates and fish farming.

But the greatest threat to people and wildlife living anywhere near deserts is climate change, which is already having a greater impact on desert regions than elsewhere. The Dashti Kbir desert in Iran has seen a 16 per cent drop in rainfall in the past 25 years, the Kalahari a 12 per cent decline and Chile's Atacama desert an 8 per cent drop.

The problems of more heat and lower rainfall are being compounded by the melting



Camels drink water in the Sahara desert in this recent photo.

- PHOTO: AP

of glaciers in mountainous regions. These waters sustain life in deserts but would be perilously close to drying up if global warming continued as expected.

The glaciers in the mountains of south Asia are expected to decline by 40 per cent to 80 per cent in the next century with profound effects on large populations in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and China. Development in the next 100 years is largely contingent on what happens to the climate.