

Trio tackle two thirds of Sahara route



New York, Jan 16: Three young athletes, running the equivalent of two marathons a day in some of the harshest conditions, have completed approximately two-thirds of their way across the Sahara Desert in a United Nations-backed bid to raise awareness for global water crisis.

Charlie Engle of the United States, Ray Zahab of Canada and Kevin Lin from Taiwan crossed Niger into Libya on Saturday, completing some 3,800 kilometres of their 6,437-kilometre-long extreme quest that is taking them from Senegal on the Atlantic Ocean to Cairo, UN Development Programme spokesperson Irena Mihova said yesterday.

They expect to cross into Egypt on February 13, reaching the Red Sea on February 23 before turning north to Cairo, in an awareness-raising odyssey that will be the subject of a feature documentary film, "Running The Sahara", directed by Oscar winner James Moll.

Pounding over endless sands and camel tracks, past towering dunes, stark rock mountains and mud-brick mosques, through oases and nomad settlements, the three left St Louis in Senegal in early November and passed through Mauritania, Mali and Niger before reaching Libya.

"For the runners, water is a daily necessity", Mihova said. "For the people of the Sahara, and throughout the developing world, it is a lifelong concern."

This is made clear in the UNDP 2006 Human Development Report (Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis) which offers fresh new data on how many poor people go without water and sanitation, the inequality of access within and between nations, and how clean water affects child survival rates.

It calls on the group of eight (g-8) developed nations to spearhead an urgent global action plan to resolve the world's growing water and sanitation crisis, which causes nearly two million child deaths every year and holds back countries' development, especially in Africa.

Against the backdrop of the world-wide challenges the water crisis presents to development, the three athletes are interacting with the people who live in the 5.6 million square kilometres of the Sahara, witnessing some of the work by UNDP and others in the region.

"Each runner brings his own unique story and motivations, but all unite around a love for Africa and a profound desire to make a difference in the lives of the people of the Sahara in the best way they know by risking their lives running coast-to-coast across the Sahara Desert to prove that the impossible is possible; and in the process bring people into a new relationship with the Sahara and its people", UNDP said.

Among projects by the agency and global environment facility, an independent financial organisation, that the runners have already visited or will soon visit during their extreme marathon are water-management, governance and peace-building efforts in Mali and Niger, a conservation project for medicinal plants in Egypt, dam construction in Mauritania and a school in Senegal.

Bureau Report