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Polluted ground in Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 2013. This issue of *Nature*, to mark the FAO's International Year of Soils, presents a series of Perspectives on the make-up and function of soils, their role in ecology and human health and the prospects for sustainable soil management. In Comment, Luca Montanarella makes the case for an international agreement to protect soils worldwide. **PAGES 32, 51, 60 & 69**

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