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UN UNVEILS A ROADMAP TO A SAFER WORLD BY REDUCING RISK

Living with risk- A global review of disaster reduction initiatives

(9 August) Tokyo, Japan: United Nations chiefs launch a global review on disaster reduction initiatives to call for a world in which earthquakes shake buildings but not economies; in which cyclones bring drama but not tragedy, and in which floods drench landscapes without washing away hope.

Living With Risk is a 400 page study of the lessons learned by experts and communities in response to hazards presented by natural forces - volcanoes, fires, hurricanes, tsunamis, landslides and tornadoes – technological accidents and environmental degradation. The challenge is daunting: in the last decade, 4,777 natural disasters have taken more than 880,000 lives, affected the homes, health and livelihoods of 1.88 billion people and inflicted economic losses of around \$685 billion on the world's economies.

“Today's disasters are often generated by, or at least exacerbated by, human activities,” says Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of United Nations, in a foreword to the book. “ At the most dramatic level, human activities are changing the natural balance of the earth, interfering as never before with the atmosphere, the oceans, the polar ice caps, the forest cover and the natural pillars that make our world a livable home. But we are also putting ourselves in harm's way in less visible ways. At no time in human history have so many people lived in cities clustered around seismically active areas. Destitution and demographic pressure have led more people than ever before to live in flood plains or in areas prone to landslides.”

Living With Risk examines the lessons of the UN's International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, which ended in 1999. It studies the traditional solutions that for centuries protected communities in various parts of the world against flood, or windstorm, or fire or drought. It examines the new pressures created by the explosive growth of the cities. It looks at the ways in which political imagination and better communication have already begun to save lives and build hope for the developing nations.

(more)

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“There is nothing inevitable about death in an earthquake,” says Kenzo Oshima, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. “Earthquakes don’t kill people, unsafe buildings kill them. The earth’s natural forces are awesome – but they are also predictable. Tragically too many people who have perished in a so-called “natural” disaster did so because, they, or their leaders, failed to see the hazard, and take steps to avert tragedy. Think of this study as a starting point on the journey to a safer planet.”

The report examines the intricate links between economic development and environmental insecurity; at the way the apparently random violence of nature – in the form of hurricane or earthquake – can shatter fragile economies and leave the poorest people with even fewer resources; at the way smaller, less dramatic disasters can continue to cripple stricken communities long after the camera crews and the relief agencies have moved on. The report calls for simple steps like risk assessment, warning mechanisms and public safety to be built in to all development planning for the future.

“One of the most important demanding challenges when dealing with disaster reduction is that while action or investment should help to solve a community’s immediate needs, it must at the same time, reduce any risks from catastrophe. This is especially important in countries where development is a survival issue “ said Sálvamo Briceño, head of the UN inter-agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction launched in 2000, which today publishes the new prescription for a safer world. “For instance, early warning systems in remote parts, where communication is scarce, could also serve as a channel for "normal" emergencies - accidents or health emergency. Education is certainly part of the answer. An educated population builds a stronger and safer society.”

For example: in 1991, more than 139,000 people in Bangladesh perished when a tropical cyclone coincided with a tidal surge. Since then, weather forecasters, government planners and local volunteers have worked out swift, simple and cheap ways of warning the people most at risk, and getting them to the nearest storm shelters. Tidal surges and cyclones are still a fact of seasonal life in the Bay of Bengal. Now people are more prepared for them, and there are far fewer deaths. But lessons learned in one region are not applied in another. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch damaged up to 70 per cent of the infrastructure in Honduras and Nicaragua. One year later the worst cyclone in 100 years to hit the Indian state of Orissa. It affected ten times as many people as Mitch, destroying 18,000 villages in one night.

“Living with risk suggests a different future. Disaster reduction and attacking vulnerability is the best of all bargains. It costs less, and it saves more lives, protects livelihoods and builds a better future. Disaster risk reduction is part of sustainable development,” Mr. Briceño said.

Living With Risk is a road map to a better world, in which communities live with the environment, rather than at hazard from its natural forces. The document builds on the experience of politicians, planners, civil engineers, bankers, insurance chiefs, geologists, meteorologists, social workers, doctors and emergency experts. It looks equally at the extra pressures implicit in worldwide warming because of human action and the simple but effective protection against drought, flood and storm adopted by communities as diverse as the Inca people of the Andes, the villagers of Viet Nam and the merchants of Shanghai centuries ago.

“We must learn once again to live with nature,” said Mr Briceño. “I am not proposing high technology answers, or a return to some simpler world. The first is beyond the range of many economies, and the second is fantasy. We are not asking for the impossible. We are simply proposing that we understand the hazards better, why we are vulnerable, what the risks are, and based on that, prepare and prevent more carefully.”

*The full text of the publication is available on ISDR’s website (www.unisdr.org)
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