

## **Keynote Speech on Disaster Reduction and Response**

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Distinguished participants, colleagues and friends,

As I am in the last leg of my North Korea mission visiting four countries, it is my great pleasure to participate in this regional workshop on Total Disaster Risk Management (TDRM) today. As you may know, natural disaster is an issue that remains close to my heart. It is also an area that my office OCHA or Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) Secretariat, which I oversee, both have specific mandates on. As such I look forward to sharing my views and concerns on disaster issues with all you from some 16 Asian countries.

Disasters are, indeed becoming an issue of growing concern worldwide. The impact of disasters upon our societies has been greatly increased, becoming a major obstacle for us to achieve sustainable socio-economic development. I witnessed this first hand during my visit a few weeks ago to southern African countries suffering from drought, and more recently, discussed the matter in length with my Chinese and North Korean counterparts last week.

Each year, disasters take about 100,000 lives; uproot at least 25 million people; and affect more than 200 million people. Over 50% of displacement results from disasters such as flooding and drought. The direct economic loss is estimated at billions of dollars, which sets back socio-economic development, especially in developing countries.

Asia is the most disaster-prone region in the world. In the last two months alone, floods, landslides, and typhoons in Bangladesh, China, India, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, took human lives and caused human suffering and billions of dollars of economic losses.

To save lives and reduce human suffering, both national and international communities have been doing their best in disaster response, which is not only critical but necessary. However, disaster response alone is insufficient.

We all know that ‘natural’ disasters are not natural, which has much to do with human activities. Disasters are the result of extreme natural hazards and unsustainable human development activities, such as rapid urbanization, and unplanned human settlements. Much can be done to prevent the occurrence of disasters, or at least to mitigate the impact of disasters, if we mainstream disaster risk management into development processes. We must recognize that good disaster risk management helps to achieve development goals such as poverty eradication and environment sustainability.

Various studies over the past two decades indicate that natural disasters pose a growing threat to development strategies worldwide. Paradoxically, the increased impact of disasters and people’s increased vulnerability to disasters have much to do with unsustainable development activities, such as improper use of land and environmental degradation. These studies made it clear that neither disaster reduction nor sustainable development can be achieved without adopting a holistic and comprehensive approach, to mainstream disaster risk management into development policies, strategies, plans and programmes.

To mitigate the impact of disasters and sustain our socio-economic investment, governments and international organizations can no longer afford to treat disaster issues as a marginalized issue or area and deal with it on an ad hoc basis. On the contrary, we should act now, before it is too late, to adopt a proactive, holistic and comprehensive approach in disaster management, enabling us to mainstream disaster risk management systematically into development undertakings.

As the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, I am responsible for both the coordination of international disaster response and the international strategy of disaster reduction.

In disaster response, some of you may know well that OCHA has already developed a comprehensive disaster response system. This system includes a 24-hour duty system, deployment of UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team, issuing situation reports, and the launching of international appeals for relief assistance. The 24-hour duty system enables OCHA to act immediately after the occurrence of sudden disasters. Issuing situation reports enables OCHA to alert and inform the international community of the impact of disasters and relief needs required. Launching international appeals for relief assistance enables OCHA to mobilize funds needed for emergency relief assistance. Deploying UNDAC team or its Regional Disaster Response Advisors enables OCHA to provide timely support to the in-country UN system and the Disaster Management authorities of the affected country. In addition, OCHA acts as channel for donor contributions or provides emergency cash grants for immediate relief. Most Asian countries have already received OCHA's emergency grants through UNDP country offices, or the assistance of the UNDAC team.

In disaster reduction, the UN secretariat for the ISDR, as the successor to IDNDR, has been very active in four areas: 1) to increase public awareness of risks and existing solutions to reduce vulnerability to hazards, 2) obtain commitment by public authorities to reduce risk to people and their livelihoods, 3) to stimulate multidisciplinary and inter-sectoral partnerships and expand risk reduction networks, and 4) to further improve scientific knowledge of the causes of disasters and effects of natural hazards. Some initial progress has been made in the four areas. For example, ISDR has been very supportive to the initiative of Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC) and the Asian Disaster Response Unit of UN-OCHA Kobe office (ADRU/UN-OCHA Kobe) in developing and promoting the TDRM concept and approach in Asia.

I would like to take this opportunity to inform you that the United Nations, continues to strive to not only enable systematic incorporation of disaster risk management and analysis into poverty reduction, development and environment strategies, but also to respond to the threats posed by natural hazards and unsustainable undertaking efficiently and effectively whenever UN system assistance is required. To this end, I am happy to note that our

increased understanding of the link between natural disasters and sustainable development made it possible that disaster issues will be discussed in the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held in South Africa next month. My office OCHA is working with the Secretary-General's office to ensure that such a message is also delivered at the highest possible level.

Today's main theme of the Workshop is Total Disaster Risk Management – an approach that was introduced to government officials at ADRC's 4<sup>th</sup> annual meeting held in New Delhi earlier this year. The TDRM concept, as you are aware, was developed with a two-fold objective: 1) to address underlying factors leading to disasters, and 2) to emphasize multi-level, multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary coordination and collaboration among stakeholders, – both in development and disaster management.

TDRM emphasizes the undertakings of disaster risk assessment and enhances coordination and collaboration through sharing the information of disaster assessment results. With availability of disaster risk assessment results, governments, international organizations and local communities not only can take preventive measures to mitigate the impact of anticipated disasters and people's vulnerability to disasters, but also enable governments and communities to be better prepared for possible strikes of disasters.

With the disaster risk assessment results, we can also avoid development undertakings in disaster prone areas, take preventive measures to mitigate the possible disasters, develop emergency contingency plans and make necessary preparation for efficient and effective relief assistance whenever necessary.

However, it will be a daunting task to promote and adopt the TDRM approach and to integrate disaster risk management into development strategies and undertakings, requiring concerted efforts from all stakeholders– both in development and disaster management.

You may agree with me that a large number of people today in disaster prone areas belong to the poor, and that they have less access to disaster information.

They often believe a disaster is an act of God and they can do little about it. Most governments in disaster prone countries prefer a reactive to a proactive approach in disaster management, for socio-economic and political reasons. Therefore, disaster response, compared with disaster reduction, has received more attention and more commitment.

Thus, to adopt the TDRM approach not only requires changes of people's thinking, behavior and even some traditional socio-economic practices, but also requires the availability of government political will, commitment, and resources.

In the above context, the Regional Workshop on TDRM should be considered as part of the on-going global effort in bridging the existing gaps among disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and sustainable development. Your very participation has already underlined the importance that you attach to the event as well as the TDRM approach.

As the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, I am committed to ensuring that the United Nations continue to support and where relevant enhance the Government's effort in disaster reduction and response. And I trust the government officials in Asia will make every endeavor to incorporate disaster risk management into national development policies, strategies, plans and programmes, creating a favorable environment for achieving our shared goal- disaster reduction and sustainable development.

I would like to reiterate that the recent disasters in Asia have caused severe suffering of millions of people and billions of dollars of economic loss. The recent floods in China alone affected some 57 million people, and it's related direct economic loss was officially reported around 2.2 billion dollars. These underline the increasing risk of natural disasters that we will face in the years ahead and also the increasing vulnerability of the population. I believe that the increasing impact and damage caused by disasters may take away or otherwise limit the gains in economic development in the region. Therefore, our work in disaster risk management becomes critically important.

To conclude, I wish you a great success of the workshop as well as your commitments to the TDRM approach beyond the workshop.