HIGHLIGHTS OF PRESS BRIEFING ON DISASTER REDUCTION EDUCATION

This afternoon, a press briefing was held at the United Nations Office at Geneva on the occasion of the launching of a children's game, *Riskland*, which teaches children about disaster reduction and prevention.

In her opening remarks, Elina Palm, the Latin-American and the Caribbean Regional Coordinator for the United Nations Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), and one of the creators *Riskland*, said her agency's mission was to create a disaster-resilient community by working closely with a number of agencies and organizations at different levels. The UN/ISDR aimed to increase awareness about the risks of disaster and how they could be reduced.

The world disaster reduction campaign was one of the most important tools to build and create this awareness at the global scale. The topic of this year's campaign was "learning and education" about risk reduction. The campaign coincided with the International Day of Disaster Reduction, which would be celebrated tomorrow, 13 October, and at which time the game *Riskland* would be launched, Ms. Palm added. Other activities for the International Day included an art contest for young people and several local, national and regional activities, which would aim to spread the importance of disaster reduction.

The impact of disasters was increasing, Ms. Palm said. Last year some 254 million people were affected by disasters caused by natural hazards; this figure represented an increase by 180 per cent compared to 1990. In 2003, the economic losses were estimated to be 65 billion US dollars and every year thousands of people, mostly women and children, were killed by disasters triggered by natural hazards.

The impact of disasters depended largely on the degree of vulnerability and the way in which individuals created risk in societies, Ms. Palm said. According to a recent report by the United Nations Development Programme, 75 per cent of the total global population was living in areas that had been affected by disasters caused by natural hazards over the period between 1980 and 2000.

There was a lack of a culture of prevention which often increased people's vulnerability in cases of natural hazards. Reducing the risks of disaster in an effective way called for an understanding that disasters were not natural, or "Acts of God", but rather an unsolved development problem, Ms. Palm added. There was a need to ensure that the current and future generations were not creating new risks by building and investing in hazard-prone areas.

While emphasizing the importance of children learning at an early age about the long-term benefits of disaster reduction, Ms. Palm referred to a statement made by Secretary-General Kofi Annan who said **disaster reduction was a very difficult task. It implied investing today for something whose benefits lied in the distant future**.

Children were in a position to share information they received at schools or elsewhere and spread messages about disaster reduction throughout their communities, Ms. Palm added.

The game *Riskland* was developed as a flexible tool for governments, institutions and communities to incorporate disaster reduction issues in the education system and community learning programmes. The game, which was developed by UNICEF and UN/ISDR's regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean, with financial and technical support from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), showed children how nature worked and how human beings could live in harmony with it. The board game also helped children understand how some human actions could reduce the impact of disasters while others could increase our vulnerability and also provided tips about what children could do to protect themselves before and during a disaster. *Riskland* is available in 36 languages, including Chinese, Swahili, Bengali, Nepali and Mayan for indigenous children in Central America. Moreover, the game could be adapted to meet local needs simply by changing text and design.

Ms. Palm highlighted that the UN/ISDR was in the process of organizing the World Conference on Disaster Reduction which will take place in Kobe, Japan from 18 to 22 January 2005. The Conference would be an important opportunity to raise the profile of risk reduction as promote and emphasize the importance of education and public awareness for disaster reduction.

Speaking on behalf of UNICEF was Everett Ressler, Senior Project Officer for Emergency Operations, who said in order to reduce disasters the international community should focus on those people who were most vulnerable so that new innovative ways could be put into action at the grassroots level. The *Riskland* board game was an example of how to reach out to children who were most at risk who in turn could teach families and communities as a means to help build a "culture of prevention".

Given that children and women suffered disproportionally in cases of disasters caused by natural hazards, UNICEF's core concept was to advocate a "child-safe environment", Mr. Ressler said. "If there was an environment safe for children there was an environment safe for everybody", he added.

The term safety implied physical, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, and psycho-social safety, the UNICEF representative said. UNICEF had been making assurances that every one of its offices had a preparedness plan and to make sure that families and children knew what to do in an event of a natural hazard. To illustrate the point on how the game could make a difference, Mr. Ressler referred to the case of a child who had survived an earthquake by moving to a protected space under a set of tables. When the child was asked how they knew to react in that way they said they had learned to do so by playing *Riskland*.

UNICEF was working in some 2,000 villages in India, along with the Government and non-governmental organizations to build community-level preparedness and to explore what actions could be taken before a natural hazard struck, Mr. Ressler added.

"Learning was an essential element to building a culture of safety and resilience", said Amy Mintz of the IFRC. *Riskland* was an example of informal learning that provided children the opportunity to learn about hazards and safety measures they could take. The IFRC had been working at the local level with communities, as well as with governments

and other international agencies, on a three-pronged approach to disaster risk reduction – awareness, action and advocacy.

Efforts had been made to raise awareness of individuals and children of the risks they could face and to empower them with ways at minimizing those risks. Actions had also been taken to mitigate the disaster impact. For example, the IFRC had established youth community-based risk reduction and response action teams in disaster-prone areas. The IFRC was also working with local communities and young people to raise concerns about the impact of disaster through advocacy as a practical approach to reach decision-makers and political leaders.

"By promoting a culture of disaster reduction among youth and children", Ms. Mintz said, "we are investing in our future". Children were becoming the teachers of their communities and neighbourhoods. "Hazards did not need to turn into disasters", she added. The IFRC was trying to ensure that children got involved in disaster education activities it was organizing in their communities. One such example of these activities was "neighbourhood hazard hunts" whereby children searched for potential areas where disasters could occur and identify preventive measures to be taken. Informal learning through these types of activities could help to save a number of lives. Among the other activities currently being practiced were computer games, puppet shows, drawing exercises and theatre plays to teach communities about disaster reduction, Ms. Mintz added.

In conclusion, Ms. Mintz said, disaster reduction included all that could be done before and after a disaster struck to prepare ourselves and communities to limit the damage and help recover after a natural hazard occurred.

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