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PRESS RELEASE

UNISDR 2010/05

22 April 2010

RISK REDUCTION PLANS NEEDED TO MINIMIZE VOLCANIC DISRUPTION

Geneva, Switzerland – Although air travel in Europe is starting to resume after ash from Iceland’s Eyjafjallajökull volcano grounded flights for almost a week, thousands of travellers continue to be affected and more delays possible with the threat of further eruptions.

“We only realize how disruptive hazards can be when they have already happened,” Margareta Wahlström, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, said Thursday. “The volcano eruption is an example of a rare but largely disruptive event that exposes our key infrastructure vulnerability.”

To minimize severe disruptions in the future, the UN’s International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) is urging European governments to take more action to integrate volcano risk as part of their air travel policies and legislation. Through the Hyogo Framework for Action – a global plan for disaster risk reduction efforts – the UNISDR is working to ensure greater coordination and interaction between decision-makers and the scientific community.

“This situation demonstrates that it is important to have international and regional contingency plans in addition to local or national ones to assess volcano risks,” said Wahlström.

While the Eyjafjallajökull eruption was not a relatively big one compared with others in the past, it has caused chaos on a massive scale. Other volcanoes in Europe, such as Italy’s Vesuvius and Iceland’s much bigger Katla, would create far more disruption if they were to erupt today, according to Henri Gaudru, President of the European Volcanologist Society, speaking at a UNISDR briefing in Geneva.

Volcanologists will meet from 31 May to 4 June 2010 in Tenerife, Canary Islands, at an international conference to discuss volcanic crisis management, particularly their effect on megacities. “This meeting will be a good opportunity to discuss more action,” said Margareta Wahlström. “As the Pinatubo eruption in the Philippines showed us in 1991 as well as other ones since then, volcano risks must be urgently considered for their huge economic and social impacts and be integrated in urban planning, early warning systems and preparedness plans.”

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has reported that airport closures in Europe have caused losses of close to US\$2 billion, and left tens of thousands of travellers stranded. The final economic cost of the natural disaster is still being assessed.

For more information on the conference: http://www.citiesonvolcanoes6.com/en.session_4_3.html