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PRESS RELEASE

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Surviving Yasi due to planning and not ‘miracle’, says top UN disaster official

Geneva -- North-eastern Australia suffered no casualties after Cyclone Yasi, which UNISDR says was due to a high level of risk awareness and planning, rather than a “miracle,” as some call it.

Tropical Cyclone Yasi crossed the Australian mainland at midnight local time on Wednesday, but despite its category-5 strength, there were no reports of serious injuries or fatalities, according to a situation update from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

“What people bill as a miracle comes down to understanding risk, and knowing how to reduce vulnerability and minimize exposure to risk,” said Margareta Wahlström, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, referring to news reports of Queenslanders bunkering down in their homes, evacuating to shopping centres or driving to safer places further south.

Before Cyclone Yasi made landfall, authorities had warned that a “life threatening” weather system the size of Hurricane Katrina would slam the north-eastern coast of Australia. This was in line with last year’s predictions from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology that the country would experience more frequent and severe cyclones this season.

Queensland’s Minister for Police, Corrective Services and Emergency Services has praised disaster management groups and municipal councils for good planning and response, and also commended everyday citizens for listening to advice and taking appropriate actions to relocate.

Australia has had a long history of battling extreme weather, from Cyclone Tracy in 1974 to Cyclone Larry in 2006, both category-4 storms, which have offered the country great lessons on how to be resilient. “Not every at-risk country has the same level of risk awareness as Australia, which is worrying because any of them stand a chance of being hit by the next big storm,” said Ms. Wahlström. “Part of our advocacy is to convince governments to invest in building resilience amongst everyday people, and that no city is immune to disaster.”

When UNISDR launched its “Making Cities Resilient” campaign, the first to join was an Australian city, Cairns -- which experienced some of Cyclone Yasi’s wrath, but was not as badly hit as nearby communities such as Mission Beach, Tully, Tully Heads, and Cardwell. Ms. Wahlström visited the

Disaster Coordination Centre in Cairns, late last year, saying the city could serve as a role model for other cyclone-prone communities around the world.

With less than 100 days to the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, UNISDR has been encouraging local governments to perform risk assessments, to assign a budget for disaster risk reduction, to maintain critical infrastructure that reduces risk, and to ensure education and training in risk reduction. Mayors and other local government officials will be among thousands of disaster risk reduction practitioners to attend the Global Platform, hosted by UNISDR in Geneva, from 8-13 May 2011.

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