

PRESS RELEASE

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Disasters increase by 18 per cent in 2005, but death rates drop

30 January 2006, Geneva— In 2005, there was an 18 per cent rise in disasters that killed 91,900 people according to official figures issued by the Belgian Université Catholique de Louvain's Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) and the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) in Geneva.

There were 360 natural disasters last year compared to 305 in 2004. "This increase," says CRED's Director, Prof. Debarati Guha Sapir, "is mainly due to the rising numbers of floods and droughts that affect large swathes of a population." CRED figures indicate that the number of floods increased by 57 per cent in 2005 (107 in 2004 and 168 in 2005) and droughts by about 47 per cent (15 in 2004 and 22 in 2005).

The number of people affected by these types of disasters continues to rise in 2005. In total 157 million people--seven million more than in 2004--required immediate assistance, were evacuated, injured or lost their livelihoods.

Despite this, loss of life was significantly lower than in 2004, during which 244,500 people died as a result of natural hazards. Although the numbers of people killed in the last two years is high compared to figures from the last decade, Prof. Debarati Guha Sapir, points out that in 2004 and 2005, most disaster-related deaths were due to a single incident of devastating proportions: The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami accounting for 92 per cent, and the 2005 South Asian earthquake, for 81 per cent of deaths in each respective year.

According to CRED's analysis, the decrease in deaths is directly linked to the type of disasters that occurred last year. Floods and droughts directly impact large numbers of people and their economic livelihoods but are less likely to cause loss of life as in earthquakes and windstorms.

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“The key issue to remember,” says ISDR Director Salvano Briceno, “is not the number of disasters but their economic and social impact on development and in particular on vulnerable populations. Just one disaster can wipe off the economy of a whole region or country and put hundreds of thousands people at risk of economic and social marginalization.”

Disasters in 2005 cost a total of 159 billion USD in damage, although out of this figure, 125 billion USD were for losses caused by Hurricane Katrina in the United States.

Notwithstanding, costs incurred from disaster damage rose by 71 per cent from the total 92.9 billion USD in 2004.

Additional threats such as global warming, environmental degradation and rapid urbanization continue to make millions of people more vulnerable to natural hazards every year. “These figures re-affirm trends we have been observing for the past decade,” says Salvano Briceno, “less people are dying from disasters, but there are many more long-term, negative implications for sustainable human development. Countries and communities need to understand their risks, invest in resources and prioritize their policies to reduce their vulnerability to natural hazards. It is the only way to spare lives, reduce economic and environmental destruction when the next disaster hits.”

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CREd was established in 1973 as a non-profit institution, with international status under the Belgian Law. It is located within the School of Public Health of the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) in Brussels. For more information please visit: <http://www.cred.be/>.