



7 January 2005

## **10 preliminary lessons learned from the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004**

United Nations Inter-agency secretariat of the  
International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)

Almost three weeks following the deadly tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of people and affected several million in the Indian Ocean region, the ISDR secretariat notes 10 preliminary lessons learned from the disaster.

**1. We are all vulnerable to natural disasters.**

Altogether 12 countries were directly impacted by the tsunami, and an additional 39 countries lost citizens as tourists or expatriates. While the immediate consequences of disasters are felt at particular places, the effects always spread more widely.

**2. Careful coastal land-use planning is essential to minimise risk.**

Nearly 3 billion people, or almost half the world population, live in coastal zones, which in many cases are prone to natural hazards - especially tropical cyclones, floods, storms and tsunamis. For many, the sea provides a source of income, such as for fishing villages right on the shore. Governments and local authorities need to undertake long term land use planning to ensure that disaster risks are minimised.

**3. Public awareness and education are essential to protecting people and property.**

In Thailand over 1,800 lives were saved because a tribal leader recognised the imminent danger when the sea suddenly receded, and so decided to evacuate his people up to the hills. 100 tourists owe their lives to a 10-year-old girl from England who warned them to flee to safety, moments before the tsunami engulfed the beach. The girl recognised the signs after learning about tsunamis in her geography class.

**4. Early warning saves lives.**

As the horror of the devastating tsunami of 26 December 2004 unfolded, the world was shocked to learn that if tsunami early warning systems had been in place in the region, many thousands of lives could have been saved. The tsunami highlighted risks that other regions face owing to the lack of regional tsunami warning systems, such as the Caribbean and countries located along the Mediterranean coastline.

**5. Countries can work together ahead of time, as well as when disaster strikes.**

There were many instances of countries in the Indian Ocean region quickly providing help to affected neighbouring countries. But countries can also cooperate ahead of time, before disasters strike, for example on regional early warning systems, preparedness and response plans, in addition to developing necessary systems at the national and local levels.

**For more information, please contact:**

Brigitte Leoni  
Inter-agency secretariat of the International Strategy  
for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR)  
Tel: +41 22 917 49 68  
Email: [leonib@un.org](mailto:leonib@un.org), [www.unisdr.org](http://www.unisdr.org)



- 6. Reducing risk depends on close interaction between the scientific and technical community, public authorities and community-based organizations.**  
The disaster demonstrated the importance of strong interaction and communication between technical and political actors. There is a need to strengthen the link between scientific and technical institutions, national and local authorities, and community leaders to build knowledge and the basis for avoiding future human, economic and social losses from disasters.
- 7. Developing and respecting appropriate building codes can minimise exposure to risks.**  
Construction of housing and hotels along vulnerable coastal areas along the Indian Ocean meant that thousands of people were engulfed by the enormous tsunami while they were sunbathing on the beach or sleeping in their hotels. Regulations to manage the construction of new buildings near the coastline and the development of multi-story designs that offer refuge on higher floors are examples that could mean fewer lives are lost from tsunamis in the future.
- 8. Humanitarian aid needs to invest more in disaster prevention in addition to immediate relief needs.**  
Donors need to reduce risks in the long-term by including prevention in aid and relief programmes. The international community has summoned US \$4 billion dollars in the two weeks following the tsunami to help relief and reconstruction. Let us allocate at least 10 per cent of this amount for investment in risk reduction measures.
- 9. Concrete action and good coordination is vital to ensure people's safety from disasters.**  
Governments need to demonstrate their political will and commitment to disaster risk reduction through concrete measures. For example, Governments could reserve a national budget line for disaster reduction; donor funds could be put to strategic use to support and build capacity for disaster risk management. Coordination is also an essential element, to ensure effective disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response across the entire UN system, governments and non-governmental organizations.
- 10. Telecommunications and the media have a crucial role to play in disaster risk reduction.**  
Phone systems, mobiles, television, radio, news services and the internet are all examples of tools the media and telecommunications can contribute to risk awareness, education and early warning. Alerts can be communicated and broadcast to ensure that even the most vulnerable receive warnings that could potentially save their lives. Media systems help people visualize and learn about the risks they face and about options for reducing their risks.