STATEMENT
by
Sálvano Briceño, Director, Secretariat for the ISDR
at
the 12th Civil Defence World Conference
“Civil Defence: a tool for international solidarity against natural and man-made disasters in the 21st century”

Mr. Chairman, dear participants,

The Secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) is very pleased to have been invited to make a statement at the opening session of the 12th Civil Defence World Conference held under the theme of international solidarity against natural and man-made disasters.

Let me begin by saying that this is the first meeting I attend in my new capacity as Director of the Inter-Agency Secretariat for the ISDR; I am honoured to begin my new assignment by addressing issues of such critical importance to us all. Solidarity is the cornerstone for the success of the ISDR, which is mandated to work with a wide range of stakeholders promoting increased recognition of the importance of disaster reduction.

Mr. Chairman,

Even a casual observer would conclude that during the past decade there has been a notable increase in the incidence of natural disasters which have inflicted untold human hardship and suffering in many countries. Disasters are not confined to particular regions, nor do they discriminate between developing and developed countries. For the past year alone, extreme events such as widespread floods in France, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Bangladesh, Mozambique and Vietnam, as well as the devastating earthquakes in El Salvador and India, and just yesterday in Peru, have reminded us of the need to take substantive preventive measures towards disasters.

During the 1990s there was a ten per cent annual increase in the economic loss due to disasters. Looking towards the future, some recent projections indicate that without aggressive disaster reduction interventions, by the year 2065, the economic cost of the impact of disasters will account for a significant proportion of global GDP. These costs are likely to be even more significant if we factor in the projections made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Global warming is expected to increase the incidence of disasters in terms of the increased frequency and intensity of storms, droughts and floods, not to mention the submerging of low lying coastal areas and islands as a result of the rise in world sea level. The future will also witness more complex interaction between technological and natural hazards, which are currently beyond our capacity of prediction.

Although we continue to refer to these disasters as “natural”, they are, to a large extent,
man-made. Population growth, together with population movements and displacements to hazard prone areas; the uncontrolled growth of megacities; the increasing emission of carbon dioxide and other green house gases; deforestation and desertification; erosion of agricultural land through poor irrigation practices; the destruction of rangelands through overgrazing, these are all human triggered factors which are all playing a key role in increasing the susceptibility to so-called natural disasters by contributing to the vulnerability of concerned populations.

Mr. Chairman,

Natural hazards do not in themselves inevitably lead to disasters but instead disasters result from the adverse impact of such hazards on vulnerable ecological, economic and social systems. In other words, disasters can be prevented or limited by conscious human action designed to reduce vulnerability. It was this recognition that prompted a major conceptual shift from the traditional emphasis on disaster response to disaster reduction reflected in the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) which is based on the promotion of a global “culture of prevention”.

The work carried out by the Secretariat for the ISDR - both in its managerial and substantive aspects - has been shaped essentially by this appreciation of the logic of disaster reduction, based on the experience of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR).

Indeed, we have learnt a number of lessons from the experiences gained during the Decade. We have come to appreciate, for example, that long-term action and commitment are necessary to promote a culture of disaster prevention on a sustained basis; and that concrete actions need to be adopted to ensure the integration of disaster reduction into the overall approach towards sustainable development. The Decade also emphasized the importance of science and technology in disaster prevention in order to enhance the application of research and to strengthen early warning capabilities at the local level. And finally, the Decade led to the increased recognition that sound disaster prevention strategies require the involvement of local communities in the decision-making process including the integration of local and indigenous knowledge. Perhaps the most significant lesson we have learnt from the Decade is that solidarity and close coordination are a prerequisite for the successful achievement of disaster reduction.

Mr. Chairman,

The ISDR has several objectives:

1. As a catalyst seeking to enable all societies to become resilient to natural hazards and related technological and environmental disasters, the ISDR promote awareness of the need to reduce the compound risk posed by environmental, social and economic vulnerabilities; firstly by proceeding from the protection against hazards to the management of risk, and secondly, by integrating risk prevention strategies into sustainable development activities;
2. The ISDR is also dedicated to generating commitment by public authorities to reduce risks to people and their livelihoods, social and economic infrastructures and their environment, with special attention given to the poor;

3. The ISDR seeks to stimulate multidisciplinary and inter-sectoral partnerships and expand risk reduction networks by engaging public participation at all stages of its implementation; and

4. The ISDR advocates for further improving the scientific knowledge of the causes of disasters and the effects of natural hazards and related technological and environmental disasters on societies and facilitate its wider application to reducing vulnerability of disaster-prone communities.

Such endeavour calls for complementarity of action at all levels in the form of solidarity. In this respect, the Secretariat for the ISDR seeks to bring a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral perspective by complementing the work of the various organizations and agencies in their areas of competence. Indeed, one of the major tasks of the Secretariat is to ensure the establishment of an appropriate synergy between disaster reduction strategies and those in the environmental, socio-economic and humanitarian fields

Towards these objectives, the following are some activities carried out by the Secretariat for the ISDR:

- A Framework for Action for the implementation of the Strategy has been established and endorsed by the Inter-Agency Task Force at its meeting in May. This document provides guidance to all entities engaged in disaster reduction for the elaboration of specific action plans.

- With the goal of strengthening cooperation with national platforms, the Secretariat is assessing their current status in order to define a strategy for action. As a first step, a questionnaire has been circulated to governments soliciting information on the status of national platforms or other arrangements put in place for advancing the goals of disaster reduction. Here, your role and participation is of course essential.

- The preparation of an annual Global Report on Disaster Reduction, which will identify disaster reduction initiatives carried out worldwide in support of the objectives of the ISDR and give a comprehensive analysis of prevailing trends in disaster reduction and their potential implications.

- The drafting of a revised and expanded Terminology on Disaster Reduction which is designed to ensure the development of commonly agreed usage by the international community.
• The launch of the 2001 Public Awareness Campaign which focuses on the theme “Countering Disasters: Targeting Vulnerability” with Sub-Themes dealing with the application of science and technology for disaster reduction; constructing disaster resistant infrastructure; and mobilizing local communities in support of disaster reduction.

All these activities are being conducted by the Secretariat for the ISDR with a spirit of transparency, inclusiveness and consultation, which, together with solidarity, are fundamental aspects of the work of the Secretariat. The Secretariat is working assiduously to bridge the gaps between North and South, between technology and public policy and between the will to act and action itself.

Mr. Chairman,

The Secretariat for the ISDR believes that the Civil Defence, using the capabilities and resources at its disposal, is uniquely positioned to bring value to the prevention of disasters, and welcomes initiatives towards this goal.

The challenges posed by natural hazards and related environmental and technological disasters, including the threats posed by climate change and related climatic variabilities, will be critical for the survival of the planet in the 21st century. The ISDR Secretariat is therefore fully committed to working with governments, national platforms, regional institutions and relevant international organizations in responding to these challenges in a creative and proactive manner by promoting a new awareness that disaster reduction is likely to bring significant long-term benefits.

Thank you.