



**WORLD METEOROLOGICAL DAY**

**Reducing Vulnerability to Weather and Climate Extremes**

**Geneva, 22 March 2002**

**Statement by**

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Secretary-General,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to address you on the occasion of the World Meteorological Day, which this year is dedicated to a theme of special interest for all of us.

I am also honoured for the invitation I received from Professor Obasi to attend this important event. WMO plays a central role in contributing to the safety of life and property, the socio-economic development of nations and the protection of the environment through its multi-faceted programmes and activities that inform the world on the state and behavior of the earth's atmosphere and climate. WMO's analysis and early warning as well as its authoritative scientific voice in this area is indispensable to the world community in dealing with natural hazards and disasters.

The theme of reducing vulnerability to weather and climate extremes is indeed very relevant within the various responsibilities I am tasked with. As the Emergency Relief Coordinator, I oversee OCHA (the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) which has a unique mandate to coordinate international response activities both in overall complex emergencies and natural disasters. In our efforts to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with various actors, OCHA also advocates for the rights of people in need; promote preparedness and prevention; and facilitate sustainable solutions. With an increase in natural disasters, which is the case these days, our involvement also deepens. We take the issue of natural

disasters seriously and seek to work closely with all relevant partners, both within and outside the UN system, in the service of the Member States.

One such partner is the ISDR Secretariat. The ISDR Secretariat, as you know, is the General Assembly (GA) mandated focal point in the UN system for the coordination of disaster reduction efforts to ensure synergies among the disaster reduction activities of the UN system and regional organizations and also within the socio-economic and humanitarian fields.

Last year, the GA in its resolution 56/195 confirmed a more permanent and expanded mandate of the ISDR Secretariat. It also confirmed the Inter-Agency Task Force for Disaster Reduction as the main forum within the UN system for devising strategies and policies for disaster reduction and ensuring complementarity of action by agencies involved in disaster reduction, mitigation and preparedness.

As the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, I am also tasked with overseeing the ISDR Secretariat as well as chairing the Inter-Agency Task Force for Disaster Reduction. I have therefore a keen interest in ensuring effective coordination in the area of disaster response and reduction amongst various players.

### **Worrying trends**

Sadly, there has been a disturbing increase in the number of natural disasters over the past years, and with it, more losses. According to Munich Reinsurance, in 2001 alone, natural disasters caused at least

25,000 deaths around the world, more than double the previous year, and economic losses of around US \$ 36 billion. These figures would be much higher, and some experts estimate at least double or more, were the consequences of the many smaller and unrecorded disasters that cause significant losses at the community level taken into account. While images of devastation in the aftermath of powerful earthquakes that struck India, El Salvador and Peru; floods that ravaged many countries in Africa, Asia and elsewhere; and droughts that plagued Central Asia including Afghanistan, Africa and Central America still remain fresh in our memories, new disasters such as the cyclone in Madagascar or floods in Bolivia capture our attention today. What is more disturbing is the knowledge that these trends of destruction are on the rise instead of being kept in check.

Indeed, recent findings, such as that of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), provide a truly alarming picture for the future. Temperatures are noticeably increasing globally. Satellite images that were reported in the media only a few days ago that showed the disintegration of a large ice shelf (Larsen Ice Shelf) in the Antarctica, was yet another stunning phenomena picked up by scientists looking into global warming issues. If there is indeed a link between climate change and a rise in weather catastrophes, we need to be prepared for more devastation to come... It is also disconcerting that while the number of geophysical disasters has remained fairly steady, the number of hydro-meteorological disasters over the last five years has more than doubled.

### **Natural Disasters and vulnerability**

While the intensity and frequency of natural disasters may be on the rise, we are aware that natural hazards are borderless and merciless. They are borderless as they affect both developing and developed countries.

They are also merciless as the vulnerable tend to suffer more at the impact of natural hazards. For example, the developing countries are much more seriously affected in terms of the loss of lives, hardship borne by population and the percentage of their GNP lost. Since 1991, more than half of disasters reported occurred in countries of medium human development. However, two-thirds of those victims of natural disasters came from countries of low development, while just 2 per cent came from highly developed nations. Those living in developing countries and especially those with limited resources tend to be more adversely affected as well. With the looming rise in the natural disasters and vulnerability *per se*, the world community must strengthen its efforts to cope with it; more resources – both material and human – must be devoted. In all of this, the UN system through its relevant and competent agencies has a unique and increasingly important role to play. We must put our acts together - more than ever, we must maximize our efforts.

### **The need to work together : WMO, ISDR Secretariat, and OCHA**

It is against this background that I am particularly encouraged by the close and constructive working relationship existing between the WMO and the ISDR Secretariat.

The roots of this partnership are to be found in the long history of commitment by WMO in the efforts of the International Decade for

Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) in the 1990s. For example, one of the main success stories of this decade was the achievement of WMO's Tropical Cyclone Program (TCP), which has greatly contributed in reducing the impact of tropical cyclones world-wide.

We are pleased to note, moreover, that the support by WMO is even stronger for the ISDR Secretariat. For example, WMO is spearheading one of the four Working Groups established within Inter-Agency Task Force that looks into climate and disasters. WMO together with the ISDR Secretariat was instrumental in the establishment of the International Center for Study of El Nino phenomenon in Ecuador.

In addition, WMO has been the first UN specialised agency to second a senior expert to the ISDR Secretariat and more recently has offered office space to the ISDR Secretariat in this very building. On behalf of the ISDR Secretariat, I am grateful for these contributions by WMO.

I believe I have cited enough examples of partnership between WMO and the ISDR framework. I am also pleased to note, in passing, that just last week, my Chief of Emergency Services Branch from OCHA/Geneva attended the 29<sup>th</sup> session of the WMO/ESCAP panel on Tropical Cyclones held in Myanmar, on behalf of both OCHA and the ISDR Secretariat. I understand that the meeting was very constructive and that the general consensus was reached on the need to for WMO, ISDR and OCHA to collaborate more in the future.

Beyond the ISDR Secretariat and OCHA, let me note that WMO has also much to offer in the area of scientific and technological

expertise. With respect to risk assessment and risk reduction, the national meteorological services of WMO members have made a quite significant contribution through the characterisation of climate and its variability, including the probabilities of extreme events. This data, cross referenced with socio-economic vulnerability can provide decision-makers with a very valuable and comprehensive picture of the resilience of a given community to a set of known hazards.

In this regard, I would like to mention that we are increasingly being requested by governments to address natural disasters in a more integrated fashion, giving appropriate weight to both the response phase and to the risk reduction process. To this end, science and technology has and can play an even more prominent role in reducing the economic and social consequences of natural hazards. In order to reduce vulnerability, we must forge an effective interface between disaster response and disaster reduction and between the various partners mandated for these activities. In doing so, we need to focus our support to the women and men with chronic vulnerability from developing countries and communities.

At this juncture, I would like to briefly touch upon the wide recognition that disasters affect women and men differently. Women's social, economic and political position in many societies makes them more vulnerable to natural hazards. However, women are not just victims. In this regard, the ISDR Secretariat has been striving hard to advocate that gender perspective needs to be incorporated into disaster prevention, mitigation and recovery strategies highlighting the role of women as part of the solution rather than their vulnerability to disasters. This message was clearly accepted during the panel presentation by the Director of

ISDR Secretariat during the Commission on the Status of Women, which will also contribute to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) process.

I believe this up-coming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (26 August- 4 September), which is a follow up of Agenda 21, developed at the Rio World Summit ten years ago, is a very important occasion. The summit will provide us with the opportunity to disseminate an important message on the need to commit to disaster reduction as part of sustainable development efforts. It is understood that there is no sustainable development unless social, environmental and technological development is also properly managed. Such a development will require an alliance of men and women with different background and expertise. Together natural hazards must be prevented and managed better to the extent possible in order to avoid further damages and to minimise adverse impact on the development process, particularly in developing countries.

Disaster reduction is therefore increasingly recognised as an important requisite for sustainable development to be included in the follow up to Agenda 21. The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction is considered by agencies, NGOs and civil society partners as an overall framework towards achieving that goal. Its Secretariat and Task Force are now actively engaged, in collaboration with member States, to mobilise the disaster reduction community in order to craft a coherent message and course of action that we all hope will emerge from the forthcoming WSSD conference in Johannesburg.

A month ago, when I stopped over in the Hague, I personally met with Minister Jan Pronk, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for the WSSD to discuss this very issue. I am pleased that WMO and many other agencies and organisations share with us the value of this effort and are actively supporting it.

Clearly, there are challenges ahead. Yet today, I have flown from NY to deliver this message of hope, for there is indeed hope amidst some disturbing trends.

To conclude, natural hazards are here to stay. But it is within all of our vested interest to ensure that these hazards will not become unmanageable disasters. More importantly, it is in our power to continue to address them together to reduce vulnerabilities and build a world of resilient communities.

Thank you.