



THE SECOND ASIAN MEETING ON THE
UN INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DISASTER REDUCTION

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Statement By

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is for me an honour and a pleasure to be here today to address this second Asian meeting on the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

First of all, I wish to thank the Governments of India and Japan, as well as the other organisers of this event, for inviting me to contribute my point of view to the discussions. In my capacity as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, I was entrusted by the Secretary-General of the UN with the responsibility of supervising the implementation of the ISDR programme to which I am committed in consideration of the strategic importance of reducing the impact of natural and related disasters.

While we meet here today, our minds cannot but go back to the memory of the devastating earthquake that struck the Gujarat region one year ago. I hope that we may consider this event also as a tribute to those who lost their lives and to those who have struggled during the rescue effort. I feel we are pursuing this effort today, by looking into ways to prevent such massive destruction and suffering in future. This should be a moral imperative for us and a teaching for the future generations. Let me also say that I am particularly pleased with the venue of this meeting because India represents a case in which high exposure to natural hazards combines with remarkable capacities and know-how in the areas of disaster management and vulnerability reduction.

Today, I would like to speak about the ISDR Programme and its efforts in generating a culture of prevention for a safer world in the future. The Director of the ISDR Secretariat will talk in greater detail about the work of the UN and its partners in this area and we will also have the opportunity to discuss the linkage between natural disasters and sustainable development during the panel discussion of this morning.

Let me start by reminding us that 2001 was a very eventful year. In 2001 at least 25,000 people lost their lives in natural catastrophes¹. According to figures recently released by the Munich Reinsurance Company, about

¹ Previous year: 10,000 (source MunicRe – 2001).

700 natural catastrophes were recorded in 2001, which was above the long-term average of 650, but still below the record set in 2000 with 850 disasters. Economic losses, were estimated at about US\$ 36bn, exceeding the previous year's figure of US\$ 30bn.

At the beginning of last year, an earthquake in El Salvador triggered numerous landslides, which buried hundreds of people. A little less than two weeks later, the earth shook in the densely populated Gujarat region destroying numerous towns and villages within a radius of several hundred kilometres from the epicentre. The death toll was staggering. A few weeks later, in February, there was a stir in the United States, when Seattle was hit by the most severe earthquake in 50 years. On that occasion, numerous large industrial enterprises along the Northwest coast were affected with insurance claims totalling some US\$ 300 million.

Other events like heat waves, droughts, and forest fires continue to affect many countries of the world. Windstorms and floods dominated the overall balance for 2001. They accounted for more than two-thirds of all the disastrous events recorded during the year and no less than 90% of the economic losses caused by natural catastrophes.

I am mentioning these figures to remind us once again of the enormous loss potential of natural hazards. Whether they happen in developing countries or highly industrialised regions, natural disasters pose a major threat to our planet, which we can no longer ignore. That is why the UN General Assembly decided to launch the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction in the nineties and, more recently, to confirm the ISDR as a permanent function of the UN system. In fact, on 21 December 2001, the General Assembly adopted resolution number 195 which gives to the ISDR Programme the role of a global strategy for the reduction of the impact of natural and other related disasters and entrusts the ISDR Secretariat with the coordination of disaster reduction strategies and programmes within the UN system.²

As many of you know, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction is rooted in a long-standing evolution of scientific knowledge and capacity development. In 1994, the World Conference on Natural Disaster reduction, held in Yokohama, adopted a declaration of principles and a strategic document which embodied guidelines and objectives for all countries to reduce their vulnerability and progress towards an integrated approach to managing disaster risk. The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action formed the basis for a further step ahead which came

² A/res/56/195, paragraph 6.

in 1999 at the IDNDR Programme Forum held in Geneva, which laid the conceptual basis for the ISDR as we know it today.

In addition, the General Assembly has endorsed the ten-year review of the Yokohama Strategy in 2004. I am sure this will represent a valuable moment for the international community to reflect in depth on the issue and to assess progress and chart the future. I encourage you to start planning for this momentous process and to provide support to the ISDR Secretariat as they gather information and lessons learned for the review.

The ISDR is a programme conceived to bring to the regional level the results of policies and strategies devised at the global level. One evident benefit of this regional approach is a greater information flow between partners, which results in cross-fertilisation of ideas, knowledge and eventually capacity. There is much that can be learnt through information exchange as much as there is a fair deal of know-how that can be derived from local practices and indigenous knowledge.

This very meeting is a manifestation of regional coordination and commitment. Not only India and Japan acting as host and organisers of this event, but also other national governments and regional organizations such as ADPC, ADRC³, the Asian Development Bank and others, are here to show support and ensure that our deliberations do not remain confined to this meeting room.

Let me also add that above all the ISDR is, by its very nature, a collective effort in which a multiplicity of institutional and non-governmental partners work together for a global cause. From the participating countries' standpoint, this represents an additional opportunity to foster international cooperation in a non-controversial area of work and to decrease their exposure to the risk of humanitarian emergencies. On the other hand, agencies and organizations involved in the work of ISDR, be it from within or outside the UN, can work in an inter-agency environment entirely dedicated to enhancing performance and create synergy, rather than splitting responsibilities and cause competition.

In this respect I believe that the ISDR is an undertaking worth the support of both the donor community and the participating organizations at the regional and international levels. As a UN programme, it should be regarded as a forerunner of enhanced inter-agency ventures based on team spirit among agencies of which we are going to be in need if we are

³ ADPC (Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre, Bangkok). ADRC (Asian Disaster Reduction Centre, Kobe).

to increase the effectiveness of the UN system at large. It is no secret that I am personally very committed to creating a coherent front on natural disasters by federating the capacities of OCHA, UNDP and ISDR in this field and then proceed to consolidating partnerships with others actors, also from outside the UN, in a logic of progressive alliances which cannot but benefit all those involved.

Let me conclude by mentioning that 2002 is also the year of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which will convene in Johannesburg in September. It goes almost without saying that there is no sustainable development unless social, environmental and technological vulnerability is not managed. And there is no perspective of sustained growth unless natural hazards are actively prevented from inflicting high recurrent losses. That is why the ISDR Secretariat is spearheading a wide-ranging effort to mobilise the disaster reduction community in order to craft a coherent message for Johannesburg. I am pleased to see that a substantial portion of the Agenda of our meeting today is dedicated to this endeavour.

Mr. Chairman,

I do not wish to take more time with my statement and at this point I would like to express to all of you my personal encouragement to for this day of consultations and assure you of my continuing interest and support.

I thank you for your attention.