

World Conference on Disaster Reduction

18-22 January 2005, Kobe, Hyogo, Japan

OPENING STATEMENT

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Their Majesties the Emperor and the Empress,
Excellencies, Colleagues and Friends

We gather here in the shadows of one of the worst natural disasters in modern history, a tragedy whose dimensions may never be fully known. We just paid homage to the lives lost to the tsunami, and to the local and international relief workers who have responded so valiantly.

The best way we can honour the dead is to protect the living. We must meet today to take on this challenge with renewed urgency and vigour, knowing that we must translate words into deeds, and good intentions into concrete action. A famous Japanese proverb reminds us that: "Vision without action is but a daydream; action without vision is a nightmare."

My friends, we have no time to lose in our quest to make communities safer. Earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, locusts, droughts and other hazards wreak devastation for tens of millions of people each year. In addition to these natural threats, we now face threats of our own collective making: global warming, environmental degradation and uncontrolled urbanization.

Millions of people now live in dense, poorly-planned mega-cities with little basic infrastructure. Millions more live in the most seismically active locations or the most exposed coastal areas. As always, the poor are particularly vulnerable, for they lack the resources to withstand or recover from disasters.

As the tsunami tragedy has shown us, local disasters can have global impact. It has also reminded us that global risks require truly global solutions.

Disaster risk reduction is not an additional expense – it is an essential investment in our common future. As with all investments, there are costs we must pay today to reap greater rewards tomorrow. But the benefits of this investment will be calculated not only in dollars or euros or yen saved, but most importantly, in saved lives in every corner of the globe. For I tell you truly, we will all benefit from this investment in our collective future.

To those who say, "We cannot now afford to fund disaster reduction efforts." I ask that they consider soberly, "Can we afford not to? Disaster reduction efforts represent not only an opportunity and an investment, but also a moral imperative.



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This week, we must take action in three critical areas.

Firstly I urge this Conference to adopt the proposed Framework of Action, but with an accelerated timeline and clear indicators for building disaster-resilience at the local and at the global level. In recommending this Framework for Action, I would like to recognize the work that the ISDR and its global networks have undertaken. I would encourage them to push ahead boldly in their collective efforts meeting the test of performance on the ground, and passing stringent standards of accountability.

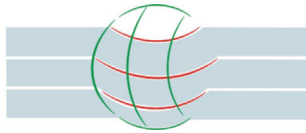
Let me be more specific with the following points for action that should all be achieved over the next 10 years:

All disaster prone countries should adopt clear, goal-oriented disaster reduction policies and action plans, underpinned by dedicated structures and resources;
People-centered early warning systems targeting vulnerable communities should be put in place in all disaster prone regions of the world;
Children – everywhere – should be learning about living more safely with the natural hazards around them, as part of their basic lifeskills education;
Communities – everywhere – should be better trained and prepared to handle disaster risks and protect themselves and their assets;
Hospitals, health centers and schools should be promoted as “safe havens” by making sure that new buildings are built to withstand earthquakes, cyclones, other hazards, and older buildings rebuilt or retrofitted.
Poor people should not be left to struggle alone against calamity: they deserve more access to meaningful financial risk-sharing arrangements such as insurance and reinsurance against disasters, through imaginative public-private partnerships; and
There should be intensified investment in research on developing and advocating more affordable risk reduction and mitigation technologies.

Secondly, I would propose that over the next 10 years, a minimum of 10% of the billions now spent on disaster relief by all nations should be earmarked for disaster risk reduction. In my other capacity, as the global Emergency Relief Coordinator, I am acutely aware of how much money is being spent on being fire brigades, putting plaster on the wound, and too little on preventing the devastation and suffering in the first place.

It can be done. The best results come when Governments and community organizations join together. As experience from Cuba, Ethiopia, Vietnam and so many other countries elsewhere has shown, losses can be significantly reduced when communities are alert to the hazards, and economies structured to reduce risk.

From the barren steppes of Mongolia to the flood plains of Bangladesh, traditional cultures have learned how to read nature’s warning signals. They have taught their



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young how to prepare for nature's mighty wrath, and they have structured their communities and livelihoods with an eye toward mitigating its destructive potential.

We would do well to learn from their traditional experience. Disaster reduction is not simply a matter of sophisticated technology and hardware; at root, it is also a matter of communication and education. Yes, we need a global early warning system, and UNESCO, ISDR and my colleagues and I at the UN are working with member states and partner organisations to make early warning for all a future reality. But let us remember: technology is not a cure-all. From Singapore to South Africa, experience shows us that people, not hardware, must be at the centre of any successful disaster warning and preparedness measures.

On this note, **let me close with my third and final point.** Disaster reduction and mitigation efforts cannot stand alone – to be successful, they must be woven into the fabric of a community's overall development. We need to radically revise our development models so that reducing and managing risk becomes central to sustainable development policy. Without this, the Millennium Development Goals will remain all but a mirage for many of the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities. We look forward to close partnerships in achieving this.

This is an ambitious but achievable programme. But we will succeed only if we put aside any differences, and make common cause for a common good.

We cannot fear the expense, we cannot falter in our efforts, and most importantly, we cannot fail in our resolve. The lives of millions depend on our turning intention into action here in Kobe.

In ending, I would like to thank the people and Government of Japan and the Hyogo Prefecture for their hospitality and their leadership. Yesterday, His Majesty The Emperor said, while commemorating the earthquake here ten years ago, that "we must build safe societies in which lives are saved from future disasters". That is indeed what our task is all about.

Thank you.

Kobe, Hyogo, WCDR, 18 January 2005