

Draft

**Australian Statement to the World Conference on Disaster
Reduction**

Thanks to Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates.

The work of this conference has been brought into sharp relief by the tragic consequences of the Indian Ocean Tsunami. I would like to take this opportunity to express Australia's condolences to those countries and peoples who suffered losses.

In the wake of this tragedy we have seen an unprecedented international relief effort. For its part, the Australian Government and the Australian people will continue to give generously to support those in need.

In Australia the Government to date has committed one billion dollars to the Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development, 60 million dollars to regional relief efforts, and a half million dollars to the flash appeal to assist the Seychelles.

We were also able to respond quickly and practically on the ground, deploying medical and victim identification teams, defence force field hospitals and rescue teams.

There has also been an outpouring of support from the Australian people. All Australians felt deeply the impact of the disaster on our neighbours. So far private donations to the relief effort have raised over one hundred and thirty million dollars in aid.

As we have heard already here, similar outpourings of support have occurred around the world.

This conference provides us with the opportunity to bring that spirit of cooperation to our continued efforts to reduce the risk of disasters and improve responses.

Sadly, inevitably there will be other natural disasters. Once again it might be a tsunami. It could happen again in the Indian Ocean. Or it might be in the Pacific or elsewhere. Or we might need to respond to a cyclone, volcanic eruption, drought or flood. Just a few days ago tragedy struck in Australia where bushfires wrought a sad toll in casualties and destruction.

So, while, quite properly, the international community is focussed on the Indian Ocean tsunami, we are obliged at this conference to remember that disasters come in many forms; that they strike in many different places; and that there is no one single prevention and mitigation response that can cover all contingencies.

Australia is a country with a unique perspective on, and experience with a range of natural disasters. As an island continent we face

some of the harshest and most variable weather in the world. And we have many remote communities. Our shores are lapped by both the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. As a country we must be prepared for a range of natural disasters from cyclones and floods, to droughts and bushfires. → as well as tsunamis.

It follows from this that we have a long and very diverse experience in disaster risk reduction and response, both domestically and in our region. For example, in the last decade we have helped Papua New Guinea respond to a tsunami, droughts, and the Rabaul volcanic eruption, in the Pacific we helped with recovery from cyclones Ami, Heta, and Ivy; and we assisted the Philippines with recovery from the recent cyclone and flooding.

As a result we, like others, have built up substantial experience in the planning and capacity building needed to mitigate the effects of disasters and respond effectively to them.

I would like to share briefly some perspectives that flow from Australia's own experience with preparing for and responding to disasters.

First, while technical responses are critical they are only part of the story. Of course, disaster reduction needs to be built on a foundation of good science. And Australia does what it can to help there. But technical fixes are a necessary, not a sufficient, condition.

There is little point in having strong technical solutions if hardware is not maintained; software can't talk to other systems; emergency services arrangements are not co-ordinated to activate integrated preparedness and response activities, or communities do not hear messages that are meaningful or usable to them.

This must go hand in hand with the development of good policy, political commitment, institutions, capacity building and – importantly – the development of community based responses. Again, we have helped in the past to build up these capacities and are ready to do so in the future.

Second, while natural disasters respect no borders - and so regional and multilateral cooperation is critical - the fact remains that countries themselves have to be in the driver's seat for managing disasters. It is individual countries that are best placed to know their own priorities and capacities. They are best placed to know what their first order priorities are, what they can manage, and what they can maintain over the longer term.

Third, the institutional interface is critical to success. The international system needs to mesh with the regional; the regional with the national; the national with the provincial or sub national; right the way down to the village level.

And, as we all preach - but perhaps do not always practise - the interface and coordination between bilateral and multilateral donors,

and stakeholders in the countries concerned, needs to be real and robust.

Fourth and finally, disasters have major consequences for the long-term development prospects of countries. Disasters strike all countries - but perhaps not equally – and in any event their burdens do fall proportionately hardest on developing countries.

This means we have to be smarter in the way we respond during the relief and rehabilitation phases, including by consciously and proactively designing interventions that are labour intensive, thereby reducing poverty. ~~We know the International Labour Organization has some good resources and insights here.~~

And the rehabilitation phase needs to help countries produce *better* environments in which people can live and work. For example, we have constructed cyclone resistant public buildings in the Pacific that dramatically cut the cost of electricity for air conditioning and lighting; that slash ongoing maintenance costs or do not damage the environment. We all have to be smarter and more innovative in what, where, and how things are reconstructed.

In closing I would briefly return to a matter to be discussed in a special session here, namely the need for a tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean.

Australia has proposed and strongly supports an international effort to establish an effective and durable tsunami early warning system for the Indian Ocean. We have brought a strong team here to discuss this matter, including Dr Geoff Love, the Director of the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, which has the primary responsibility in Australia for tsunami early warning.

It is gratifying that so many countries around the globe are willing to pledge financial and technical support to establish an Indian Ocean system. In developing a system, Australia considers it must be tailored to the specific geological circumstances of the Indian Ocean and the individual requirements of regional countries. And it must be the regional countries themselves that determine the shape and nature of the system.

Australia looks very much forward to a productive Conference.

Thank you.