



**STATEMENT BY  
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SOUTH AFRICAN PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE UN  
GENEVA  
ON BEHALF OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT  
ON THE OCCASION OF  
THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON DISASTER REDUCTION  
KOBE, JAPAN  
19 JANUARY 2005**

Mr Chair  
Honourable Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

The South African delegation wishes to congratulate you, Mr Chair, on your election, as well as the election of the Bureau. We wish, in particular, to thank the Moroccan delegation, which represented Africa on the Bureau so ably during the past year. We also wish to thank and congratulate the ISDR, which acted as the Secretariat for the World Conference, for their leadership and assistance during the preparations leading up to the World Conference.

Our delegation wishes to convey our sincere appreciation to the Government of Japan for hosting the World Conference as well as for their efforts, together with other donor countries, to ensure the participation of delegations from the developing world, in particular from the Least Developed Countries (LDC).

Mr Chair

The recent tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean region is a stark reminder that disaster risk reduction is one of the most important topics of our times. Allow me to express the sincere condolences of the people of South Africa to those countries affected by this terrible tragedy. The World Conference on Disaster Reduction is indeed both timely and necessary.

Mr Chair

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of people have perished in natural disasters, with 98% of those killed or affected coming from the developing world. This points to a clear link between poverty and vulnerability to disaster. It is estimated that, by 2025 over half of all people living in developing countries will be highly vulnerable to floods and storms.

Disaster reduction has increasingly appeared on all important international development agenda, including the World Summit on Sustainable Development and UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is widely accepted that developing countries will not achieve the Millennium Development Goals without reducing people's vulnerability to disasters and without integrating disaster reduction into development planning and programmes.

Mr Chair

In Africa, disasters are on the rise, as is the impact of disasters on Africans. Each year, disasters not only deprive millions of people of food security, access to clean drinking water, social services, but also reverse past development gains and impede further socio-economic progress. In addition, the enormous humanitarian relief necessitated as a result of preventable disasters diverts billions of US dollars, which could have been used for poverty reduction and socio-economic development. Disasters, therefore, prevent African countries from achieving sustainable development.

With regard to crises in poor countries, the international community still concentrates much of its efforts on emergency response such as search and rescue measures as well as providing emergency shelter, food, water and sanitation. Such life-saving and relief work is absolutely vital. However, the awareness for risk reduction due to the media attention to a specific disaster, soon focuses on other news of the day. The truth is that some disasters can be prevented and the effect of disasters mitigated. There is a long history of aid money being used to "bandage the wounds" rather than "prevent the injuries". It is now imperative for Governments, multilateral and bilateral development organizations, and also financial institutions, to adopt a new direction on dealing effectively and comprehensively with disasters.

Mr Chair

The South African Government has pursued a methodical, if at times protracted, effort to develop a comprehensive national strategy for disaster risk reduction and management by reforming organizational structures and adopting new legislation that will seek to integrate risk reduction strategies into all development initiatives in our country. The legislation provides clear guidance with respect to the legal establishment of the National Disaster Management Centre, the duties and powers of national, provincial and local instruments of Government as well as funding for post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation.

The South African Government is seeking, in accordance with the commitments made in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development to incorporate a risk-reduction component into all development programmes implemented by each Government department at all three levels of governance. The Government believes that disaster risk reduction should not be viewed as a separate discipline, but should be incorporated into the broad spectrum of development activities in a cross-sectoral approach.

Mr Chair

South Africa is also fully committed to play its role in the regional and sub-regional context in ensuring that disaster risk reduction gets the attention it deserves, especially when addressing hazards such as droughts, floods, locust plagues and trans-boundary pests and animal diseases. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a sub-region where food security has been severely impacted by floods followed by successive droughts, compounded by the effects of the HIV and AIDS pandemic as well as the enduring levels of poverty amongst rural subsistence farmers. To address the problem of food insecurity, the SADC Heads of State and Government adopted the Dar es Salaam Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security on 15 May 2004. This Declaration contains many elements related to protection of the gains from sustainable development through the application of appropriate risk reduction programmes. South Africa's humanitarian assistance policy in the region has also shifted in focus from relief to preparedness and reduction of risk, including providing funds towards the creation of a sub-regional food security early warning system.

Mr Chair

In the international context, South Africa is one of the four Co-Chairs together with Japan, the European Commission and the United States, of the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), a unique international partnership of more than 50 countries and 30 international organizations committed to optimally harnessing Earth observation as an instrument for sustainable development. The GEO was established to develop a new comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable global Earth observation system to be called the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS). The Ten Year Implementation Plan for the GEOSS' development will be approved by Ministers at the Third Earth Observation Summit to be held in Brussels on 16 February 2005. One of the nine identified priority societal benefit areas where the GEOSS will find application is reducing the loss of life and property from natural and human-induced disasters. The future demands predictive systems that will optimally warn and inform decision-makers and the public and reduce the chance of hazards becoming disasters. South Africa is committed to this development and especially the fact that we believe that future challenges in the field of risk reduction should be found in partnership on a global scale such as the GEOSS. We call on countries to join in this effort.

Mr Chair

In conclusion, a better understanding of the interrelationship between disaster reduction and sustainable development is needed. Disaster reduction is an investment in sustainable development, and sustainable development is a tool for disaster reduction. In this regard,

the South African delegation wishes to call on all stakeholders, especially multilateral organizations, bilateral donor countries and the international and regional financial institutions, to place more emphasis on helping vulnerable communities reduce the risk of disaster. If this does not happen, millions of people will never escape the poverty trap, as with each new flood, drought and cyclone, precious gains being made in poverty reduction are being swept away. Governments should also make demonstratable progress with implementing the agreements they have made at the World Summit for Sustainable Development on climate change and disaster risk reduction. The international community has set targets for global sustainable development and poverty reduction under Agenda 21 in the Millennium Development Goals. The South African delegation believes that progress in reducing vulnerabilities to disasters is of utmost importance for achieving the MDGs.

I thank you.