

U.S.

Kobe Plenary Statement

Mr. Chairman, Fellow Delegates,

I am pleased to have the honor to lead the U.S. delegation to this important conference -- now doubly important because of the enormous calamity that occurred recently in Asia. On behalf of the U.S. Government, I want to thank the Government of Japan for hosting such a timely meeting and for contributing so generously to the current tsunami relief effort. It is especially fitting to hold this conference at the site of a terrible natural disaster, the 1995 Kobe earthquake.

The recent profound outpouring of international relief and humanitarian assistance to the tsunami victims is unprecedented, and since December 26, 2004, earthquake and tsunami disaster assistance has been a major focus of the U.S. Government and the American people. Answering the UN Appeal issued by Under-Secretary General Jan Egeland, [phonetic: Yahn Egg-lend] the U.S. Government

pledged \$350 million dollars to relief and reconstruction. We have already spent \$96 million (as of 1/15/05) of this pledge and continue to obligate funds daily.

U.S. private corporations and individuals have already given \$500 million to assist the affected countries (1/15/05) and we expect that private U.S. contributions will exceed \$700 million in the near future, reflecting the strong faith that Americans place in individual philanthropy.

Also significant is the contribution of the U.S. military, which arrived quickly on site, providing relief assistance directly to the countries, and formed the logistics backbone for all relief providers. These operations cost the United States approximately \$6 million dollars per day.

The United States is committed to the long-term reconstruction of the affected countries, and stands ready to lead, working with the international community, to ensure the development of new mechanisms to alleviate and mitigate the impact of future disasters.

We are committed to working with the UN, and the intergovernmental Group on Earth Observations as the best existing multilateral framework for reducing disaster risk. UN organizations have a special role to play -- as they already have -- in bringing the forces of civil society and government together in common cause. Although outside efforts cannot replace those of local authorities, who have the primary responsibility for risk-reduction measures, every nation must stand ready to help in this global effort.

The United States intends to play a leading role in international efforts to build a global tsunami warning system, particularly in the Indian Ocean, by extending and enhancing the existing Pacific Ocean tsunami warning system. We are actively engaged with other governments and international bodies to realize the development of an integrated and sustainable system. But much more needs to be done.

Regardless of the warning systems we invent, public training and education is essential: average citizens need to understand what to do when hazards strike. And early warnings need to be in formats consistent with local culture, available technology, language, and level of education. Without better communication and awareness, technology will fail us – whether we are talking about tsunamis, typhoons, floods, earthquakes, or infectious diseases.

The general public must be engaged early on as full partners in developing ways to alleviate risks. We must not simply tell people what to do when a disaster strikes; we need to engage them in problem solving before crises occur. This will require greater emphasis on good governance, transparency, and dialogue with all levels of civil society. We all need to factor these concerns into our development assistance priorities.

We must avoid seizing on the risk from tsunamis to the exclusion of other risks, and we urge conference participants to take an all-hazards perspective. A systematic approach that reduces the impact of disasters must address basic needs as well as the lingering psychological impact on affected communities. An all-hazards approach should also include infectious disease, which can be triggered by natural disasters but which, like SARS, avian influenza, and HIV/AIDS, can become regional or even global disasters in their own right.

In short, the United States is calling for a coordinated approach that strengthens local capacity for hazard assessment and disaster mitigation, integrates disaster mitigation into sustainable development plans, implements aid programs that contribute to disaster mitigation, and fosters open international exchange of data and information for effective early warning, response, and recovery.

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Our efforts today can have a direct effect. As a result of the 1991 typhoon that killed 130,000 people, for example, Bangladesh now has a typhoon early-warning system in place to rapidly evacuate affected communities, built by the United States, other major donors, and, of course, the people of Bangladesh themselves. In addition to our current efforts in the tsunami-affected countries, my government is ready once again to move rapidly, together with other donor governments, UN agencies, NGOs, and the private sector, to help protect other areas and future generations.

As the great tsunami of 2004 made clear, we are all brothers and sisters living on an increasingly small planet. As one humanitarian worker said last week, "Our blood is all red, and our tears are all salty." I am confident that this conference will make a major contribution to global efforts to prevent disasters, provide early warning when they cannot be prevented, and mitigate them when they occur.

Thank you.

UPDATED: US Embassy Tokyo 1-18-05 (EST: MMurphy)

(u)z:UNESCO\IOC\2005 01 14.Amb.Baker-WDCR-Draft

Remarks.Rev.3

647-1045 January 14, 2005

Cleared: IO/EDA: William Lucas - ok
 IO/T: Rick Driscoll – ok
 EAP/J: Kristina Midha - ok
 NOAA: Helen Wood – ok
 USAID: Len Rogers – ok
 OSTP: Gene Whitney -ok
 IO: Mark Lagon
 P: Alan Yu -ok