

Notes for remarks by
UN Under Secretary-General Hans van Ginkel,
Rector, United Nations University.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, colleagues,

First I would like to convey my sincere condolences to all who mourn relatives and close friends who died in the recent tsunami. We owe it to all who died in this and other disasters to do our utmost to curb the rising trend in disasters: the number of catastrophes and the losses caused, in particular the death toll.

To achieve these objectives, we need to know risk better; reduce our vulnerability. We must take immediate action to reduce both the risk inherent in the complexity of the earth systems and the vulnerability of our society to natural hazards. Above all, we must engage ourselves in the sustained action needed to be successful.

The disaster along the rim of the Indian Ocean has forcefully revealed our vulnerability and lack of capacities to cope with the consequences of interlinked, multiple natural hazards. An adequate and functional early warning system could have saved many lives. But even then, public awareness of the possible hazards and knowledge of how to respond would have been crucial.

At this conference, UN University has emphasized the need for increasing research and learning in order to know risk better, preparing for the unforeseen by imagining the unimaginable, and making disaster management an integral part of sustainable development. We must improve the relevance of our knowledge through more site specific, targeted, in depth research and learning; working towards sustainable solutions.

Recently, UNU has also noted a particular concern about the growing vulnerability of urban centres due to rapid and extensive underground expansion – for subways, malls, parking, automobile tunnels, and public utilities. This subterranean expansion caused by growing land pressures takes place often with too little knowledge of associated risks and too few plans to minimize the effects of a natural disaster. The concentration of people as well as economic and social activities in such underground spaces merits more careful examination.

To help address our knowledge deficiencies, UN University, through its Tokyo headquarters and in cooperation with its partners, is working to model the impacts of catastrophic natural disasters on urban centres – in particular mega-cities – beginning in Asia. These detailed computer animations allow planners to visualize the likely impact of a tsunami, for example, under various advance warning scenarios, to aid understanding and mitigate catastrophic loss by better preparing in advance our infrastructure, our evacuation plans and our people. We are working similarly to model the effects on coastal urban centres of more gradual threats such as sea level rise due to climate change.

The unforeseen is unforeseen because it has never happened in the same form before. Just as hurricanes have names, each disaster is unique, individualized. This is not to say, however,

that such events are completely unforeseeable. We must reduce surprise, to expect the unexpected and prepare for it. If we neglect this effort or lack the needed imagination, the world's next natural calamity will most certainly become our next human disaster.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Of course it is not viable, sometimes not even advisable, to try to eliminate hazard completely. There will always be an event that goes beyond the designed levels of infrastructure solutions. We must avoid creating with our technology and infrastructure a false sense of security that results in even greater damage. UNU believes emphasis should be placed on reducing vulnerabilities and improving coping capacities, through education and capacity development, strengthening response preparedness and vigilance.

The vulnerability of a society determines the degree to which risk is manifested in disastrous loss. Through its new institute on the Environment and Human Security in Bonn, Germany, UN University is engaged in a partnership to create indicators to measure the vulnerability of communities to disasters – assessing the physical, social, economic and environmental factors that determine the scale and potential damage when a calamity strikes. Such assessments will help policy makers set priorities for disaster prevention.

Through UNU-EHS, the university is also working to anticipate the cumulative effects of such long-term, creeping environmental disasters for humankind as desertification, steadily falling levels of groundwater, land degradation and other consequences of environmental neglect. It is my pleasure to present to you the first edition of the UNU-EHS publication InterSections, which among other things argues that the loss of land in dryland areas in the near future will be more than the combined geographic area of Russia, the USA and China.

Education, professional training and exchange of information, from generation to generation as well as active community participation, are the most powerful tools we have to cut disaster risk and vulnerability.

I strongly appeal to all to join forces, to develop in depth, targeted, site-specific knowledge, to make it available through training and education, to improve our understanding to reduce risk and vulnerability and to strengthen coping capacities by developing appropriate response strategies.

As the think-tank of the UN system, UN University stands ready to do its part and will continue to dedicate human and in-kind resources to rehabilitation efforts where disasters have happened, and to build the knowledge base and human capacities required for effective disaster preparedness and response in the overall framework of sustainable development. We are ready to participate in global and regional initiatives, like the International Flood Initiative and the International Programme on Landslides, together with UNESCO and WMO. We are pleased to accept the invitation of Germany and other member states to join efforts like development of a regional early warning system, including appropriate communications and response systems, in the Indian Ocean region.

I congratulate the UN-ISDR, the Government of Japan, the City of Kobe and the Prefecture of Hyogo on this most fruitful World Conference on Disaster Reduction and thank you for your kind attention.