

**STATEMENT AT THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE
WORLD CONFERENCE ON DISASTER REDUCTION**

by

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On behalf of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and my own, I wish to express our appreciation for the opportunity to address the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR). I am also grateful to the Government and people of Japan for hosting this Conference, as well as for their hospitality and unflinching commitment to disaster reduction.

This Conference is taking place at a time when the world's attention is dramatically drawn to the perennial concern of natural disasters, which threaten lives, livelihoods, development and security. We are all deeply grieved by the desolation and suffering of the millions of people devastated by the tsunami that hit Indian Ocean countries on 26 December 2004. The impacts of this disaster have reached staggering proportions in terms of the scale of human loss, associated damage, number of countries affected as well as related response and recovery efforts.

Even before this event, the year 2004 had already been a year of major hazards, many of which turned into disasters. Many countries worldwide were inflicted with considerable loss of life and socio-economic impact as a result of weather-, climate- and water-related natural hazards. These ranged from one of the most severe tropical cyclone seasons in the Atlantic and the Pacific, to severe floods in Asia. However, the recent tsunami disaster has demonstrated in a dramatic fashion the need to intensify efforts to prevent natural hazards from becoming disasters. We need to develop jointly a clear vision, an effective integrated action plan and move forward together to prevent such disasters in the future. In this connection, the Conference offers a special opportunity that should be seized upon by the international community.

At a time when the world's attention is turned to the largest coordinated humanitarian relief effort, we also need strong political will and investments in risk prevention and reduction, that is, to further promote and develop a *culture of prevention*. It is urgent and our duty to accelerate efforts in strengthening pre-disaster strategies. While natural hazards may not be avoided, pre-disaster

efforts such as integration of risk assessment and early warnings into prevention and mitigation measures can prevent them from turning into major disasters. It is unacceptable to allow further losses of life and livelihoods due to disasters when actions can be taken to avert such losses.

A fundamental condition for disaster preparedness is the availability of risk assessments and well-functioning early warning systems that deliver accurate and useful information in a timely and dependable manner to decision-makers and the population at risk. In this connection, WMO is working with its partners at the international, regional and national levels to improve early warning capabilities further and ensure that these systems are available to all countries, particularly those with the least resources. *We should learn the lesson from recent disasters, including the 26 December 2004 tsunami, that there is a heavy price to pay if early warning systems are not in place.* In this connection, WMO is prepared to share its experience and competence.

Furthermore, it has been shown that a dollar spent on disaster preparedness can prevent seven dollars in disaster-related economic losses – a very considerable return on investment. The return is far higher when prevention of social and ecological losses is also taken into account. In this regard, WMO urges the allocation of a portion of bilateral and multilateral resources allotted for developmental and humanitarian actions, to pro-active pre-disaster strategies, development of multi-sectoral national disaster reduction platforms, alert systems and related activities, particularly the use of risk assessments and early warning systems. In addition, post-disaster response, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes should incorporate elements that will reduce future risks and disaster vulnerabilities.

Beyond availability and timely dissemination of reliable information, a critical component of preventive strategy is to ensure that government authorities, risk managers and the public at risk can understand and utilize the information. Awareness raising on all types of natural hazards thus forms an essential element in early warning systems, particularly where the warning period is short. Therefore, education of communities at large, the involvement of media and continuous interaction between scientists and the decision makers are critical.

Natural disaster risk reduction is at the core of the mission of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), and its 187 Members and their National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs), which monitor and issue early warnings for a wide range of natural hazards, such as tropical cyclones, severe storms, tornadoes, floods, droughts, cold spells and heat waves. *For the ten-year period 1992-2001, about 90% of all natural disasters were of meteorological or hydrological origin.* The impact of weather-, climate- and water-related disasters has continued to

increase. Losses from natural disasters of hydrometeorological origin accounted for about 65% of damages due to all natural disasters in the 1980s; these losses rose to about 90% in the 1990s. Communities in developing countries, especially the least developed countries and Small Island Developing States, are hit the hardest, increasing their vulnerability and setting back their economic and social development, sometimes by decades. While noting that the loss figures have been high, it is important to stress that these would have been even much higher without pre-disaster efforts, particularly early warning systems.

It is WMO's aim to halve the number of deaths due to natural disasters of meteorological, hydrological and climatic origin over the next 15 years, more specifically *to reduce by half the associated ten-year average fatality from the period 1995-2004 to the period 2010-2019 for these disasters*. For me personally, a death that can be prevented is one death too many. We must strive to save lives. WMO is already working towards the realization of this goal. For example, during one of the most intense tropical cyclone seasons in the Atlantic region in 2004, thanks to effective provision and dissemination of warnings, many lives were spared through timely evacuations and other disaster-preparedness measures. The challenge is to ensure that all countries, particularly the least developed countries and Small Island Developing States, have the systems, infrastructure, human capacity and organizational structures to develop and utilize early warning systems. Much can be achieved by deploying resources to strengthen pre-disaster systems for early warnings. *I encourage this Conference to endorse this WMO goal and extend it to all natural disasters.*

In particular, WMO is joining forces with all key partners, especially UNESCO and its IOC, to ensure that Tsunami Early Warning Systems will soon become a reality in the Indian Ocean and other regions at risk. The WMO Global Telecommunication System (GTS) that interconnects the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services provides tremendous potential for timely and reliable exchange of tsunami warning messages and related information among the appropriate government agencies. The Tsunami Warning System in the Pacific, established under the auspices of the IOC of UNESCO, already utilizes the WMO GTS in that region. WMO's extensive experience and capabilities in the development and operation of global early warning systems for other natural hazards will be crucial in accelerating the development of Tsunami Early Warning Systems for all regions at risk.

The **WMO Natural Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Programme** provides a coordinated and integrated approach and — through synergistic partnerships at international, regional and national levels — strengthens WMO's contribution to disasters risk reduction. WMO is committed to ensure

that its capacities are optimally provided and integrated to enable communities to take action, effectively and in the most timely manner.

Under the aegis of WMO, the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services will continue to serve as the official voice in issuing warnings for public safety at the national level for a wide range of natural hazards. WMO and the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services will also continue to monitor, assess and forewarn changes in disaster risks that may be associated with climate variability and climate change. The Third Assessment Report of the WMO/UNEP Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2001) indicated that in light of the projected human-induced change in climate regionally and globally, the duration, location, frequency and intensity of extreme weather and climate events are likely to change. Moreover, the amplitude and frequency of extreme precipitation events is very likely to increase over many areas.

In view of the above, it can be said that resources for the provision of meteorological and hydrological monitoring and warning services should be regarded as investments, rather than expenditures.

In summary, WMO wishes to underscore the following points:

1. About 90% of all natural disasters are of meteorological or hydrological origin. Losses from natural disasters, while already high, would have been much higher without early warning systems and risk assessments. WMO and the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services have succeeded in monitoring hazards as well as in developing and communicating early warnings for areas under our mandate; and therefore have critical roles to play and significant contributions to make;
2. Natural hazards will always occur, but through integrated global early warnings and disaster preparedness strategies, we can prevent these from becoming major disasters. There is a need to promote and develop a culture of prevention. We need political will and resources to ensure that global early warning capabilities are available for all natural hazards for all countries, particularly those with least resources;
3. WMO's extensive experience and capabilities in the development and operation of global early warning systems for other natural hazards will be crucial in accelerating the development of Tsunami Early Warning Systems for all regions at risk;

4. Socio-economic studies clearly demonstrate benefits in disaster preparedness; hence, resources allocated should be seen as investments and not expenditures. In this regard, WMO urges the allocation of a portion of bilateral and multilateral resources allotted for developmental and humanitarian actions, to pro-active national pre-disaster strategies, development of multi-sectoral national disaster reduction platforms and related activities, particularly the use of risk assessments and early warning systems;
5. Awareness raising on all types of natural hazards is essential, particularly where the warning period is short. Education of communities at large, the involvement of media and continuous interaction between scientists and the decision makers are critical;
6. WMO seeks to reduce by half the loss of life associated with the natural disasters of meteorological, hydrological and climatic origins over the next 15 years. I encourage this conference to endorse this WMO goal and extend it to all disasters.

In closing, let me express WMO's call for action through enhanced partnership and cooperation to build on our experiences and capabilities to reduce risks of natural disasters. This is our responsibility, our duty, and our moral imperative, which we must not shirk from, for the benefit of the present generation and for generations yet to come.

Thank you.
