

(Translation)

United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction  
Address by His Majesty The Emperor

January 18, 2005

I consider it highly significant that the United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction, with participants from all over the world, is being held here in Kobe City of Hyogo Prefecture, which suffered massive damage caused by the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake 10 years ago.

The huge earthquake and the accompanying tsunami which occurred at the end of last year in waters off Sumatra have caused damage not only in the surrounding countries but also over a widespread region, and it is said that the current death toll and the number of missing in total amount to more than 180,000. I wish to express my deepest condolences to those bereaved by this disaster.

Japan has been frequently struck by tsunami. A recent tsunami is the one caused by the Earthquake off Southwest Hokkaido of 1993, which inflicted heavy damage by earthquake and accompanying tsunami and fire on Okushiri Island and resulted in more than 200 fatalities and missing persons. We visited the disaster-affected area about two weeks after the Earthquake, and it was painful to see the terrible devastation there.

One of the major tsunamis recorded in Japanese history is the Meiji Sanriku Earthquake Tsunami of 1896, which killed more than 20,000 people. Later, in 1933, the Sanriku Earthquake Tsunami struck the same region again, and brought about 3,000 fatalities and missing persons. With almost a 40 year break between these two tsunamis, people did not have sufficient sense of vigilance against a post-quake tsunami in the second disaster, which is known to have expanded the damage.

This instance suggests that the most important factor in disaster reduction is to learn lessons from past disasters and to take measures in response. The theme of the 1.17 Declaration made at the Memorial Gathering in Commemoration of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake here yesterday was, "We shall never forget." I felt it crucial since I learned that one-quarter of the current population of Kobe did not experience that earthquake disaster.

Every year, all over the world, people are killed and tremendous damage

is incurred by such natural disasters as typhoons, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and droughts. Since Japan is located in an active seismic zone, with mountainous topography marked by numerous volcanoes, and lies along a typhoon path, it has been struck by various natural disasters from ancient times.

However, as a result of concerted efforts made by the Japanese people to promote soil conservation and flood control, and to improve methods of predicting storms and floods and early warning systems at times of disaster, in recent years, the number of fatalities per year caused by natural disasters has fallen. I am pleased to see that our disaster reduction efforts are paying off.

Damage from natural disasters may vary in their types and by region, but it is nonetheless possible to work across national boundaries, learning from past experiences, and preparing for future disasters, in the areas of prediction and disaster reduction measures as well as rescue of victims in the aftermath of disasters and recovery of disaster-affected areas. As has been the case in the most recent great tsunami, international cooperation is essential for rescue and recovery efforts when large-scale damage occurs over a wide region, and I feel reassured by the participation of so many countries, including Japan, in aiding the disaster-affected region.

This World Conference will look back on the disasters and disaster reduction activities that have taken place around the world over the past 10 years since the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction was held in Yokohama in 1994. It presents a precious opportunity to share mutual experiences, to protect lives and livelihoods of people from natural disasters, by aiming to strengthen preparedness and to create a society where people can live in safety and security. It is my sincerest hope that through discussions at this Conference, the knowledge and technologies Japan has developed over its many years of experience in the area of disaster reduction will contribute in some way to reducing damage caused by natural disasters in other countries around the world.

I would like to conclude my remarks, wishing that this Conference will have fruitful results, making for a safer world.