

UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery President Bill Clinton Transcript of Remarks to the Third International Conference on Early Warning

**27 March, 2006
Bonn, Germany**

Thank you very much and good afternoon. Minister Erler, thank you for your remarks and your introduction. Moderator Kausch, my friend Jan Egeland, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming here today. I thank the German government and the United Nations for the opportunity to address this group in my capacity as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

I do this with some humility. I am well aware that in conferences like this, the usual practice is to ask the politicians who know nothing to address the experts who already know everything, so that the cameras will cover your meeting and hopefully the recommendations which will come out of it. However, I hope that the last couple of years I have spent working on tsunami recovery as well as the work I did as President and before that for a decade as the Governor of my home state in dealing with natural disasters, the problems and challenges of early warning may give me something to offer this meeting.

The Indian Ocean tsunami, as you all know, killed an estimated 230,000 people on December 26, 2004. It was the loudest wake-up call of many about the need to reduce risk and improve management of natural hazards. Alongside the ongoing efforts to rebuild and recover from the last tsunami, the houses, the schools, the health clinics, the livelihoods, the UN Mission has been to build back better, to ensure that these recovery efforts do not simply restore communities to their pre-tsunami vulnerability, but instead leave the survivors of the disaster safer than before, including with effective early warning systems. We owe it to them and the memories of their loved ones to deliver on that promise.

Of course, we gather here because making communities safer is a global priority that goes far beyond the tsunami's reach. From Sri Lanka to Haiti, to Turkey, to recent events in Mississippi and Louisiana in the United States, we have seen years of development wiped out in a matter of moments or days. These have taken a heavy social and economic toll and will continue to do so. The total number of people affected each year by natural disasters vastly increased in the last decade. In the 1980s, an average of 147 million were affected by disasters and in the 1990s, 211 million. Last year, there were more: 97,000 people lost their lives in nearly 150 disasters, the largest number of deaths of course coming in Kashmir. In 1998, disasters caused 65.5 billion dollars in economic losses worldwide. In 2004, because of the tsunami, hurricane Ivan and other disasters, losses were about 120 billion. In 2005, losses were 220 billion.

People in the insurance industry tell me that aggregate losses in the last ten years were three times greater than in any previous decade on record. From Aceh to New Orleans to Kashmir, unfortunately, the main victims of disasters don't have insurance. They are the poor and the vulnerable and often those with the least political influence to get the changes needed that guarantee them and their families a decent life.

Why are there more disasters with greater economic and social cost? I think part of the aggregate cost is simply a function of growing population. We now have 6.5 billion people in the world. We are likely to have 9 billion by 2050. Almost without exception, the population growth is occurring in the poorest countries where they will be least able to do what you are here recommending that we all do. In other words, almost all the people who will be most vulnerable to disasters are also most vulnerable to the hazards of daily life, with the least amount of political influence. So we will have to work very hard as a group to do whatever is recommended and I hope we will never forget that. The rich countries will pay sooner or later if we let the disasters occur, will just wind

up spending more money. But we have a very bad habit of ignoring the problems of our poorer brothers and sisters until they are too grave, too painful and, alas, too expensive to ignore.

In recent years, we have added about 76 million people to the planet annually, with higher fertility rates, lower infant mortality rates and longer life expectancy. The second major factor is rapid urbanization, more people living in concentrated areas. More often than not, driven by poverty, these populations mostly settle into the more hazard-prone areas: flood planes, coastal areas, unstable hillside slopes or near active volcanoes.

Third, their and our economic activities take a toll on natural defenses against hazards. Witness the lesser impact of the tsunami in places where the coral reefs or the mangrove trees remain intact. The recent landslides in the Philippines occurred often on totally deforested slopes. Sustainable development, therefore, is imperative for human and economic as well as environmental reasons.

Fourth, our economic behavior is plainly affecting the climate. Nearly 90 percent of all natural hazards are climate or weather-related. And these extreme weather events are increasing in their number and intensity. Last year was a record hurricane season, reflected in part where the hurricanes so severely battered the Gulf Coast or the United States, Katrina and Rita.

There is a whole new spate of books out just in the last few weeks and a number of new studies which vary in their particular predictions, but the trend they articulate is clear: The planet is warming faster than most experts thought even as recently as two years ago. The ice is melting more quickly, not simply on the North Pole and the South Pole, but – particularly troubling for those of us in the northern half of the planet – on Greenland. If the North Pole melts in the summer time, it could have a sea route across the north and it won't lift the sea level. But if the Greenland icecap melts in total, it could raise the level of the North Atlantic by about 40 feet. And at predicted levels, it's going to raise the level of the North Atlantic enough to cause calamitous damage some time in the next 30 to 40 years.

Just a few days ago, there was an article warning of water refugees all over Africa because of global warming. Already over a billion people have no access to clean water. A few months ago, there was an article pointing out that, perversely, global warming would lead to very, very bitter winters, almost dangerously bitter winters in the North Atlantic, in the United Kingdom, particularly in the northern parts of Scotland and Ireland, and in some parts of Norway. Why? Because, as you put more fresh water into the Atlantic in the north from the melting of the Greenland icecap, it will interrupt the flow of tides in the oceans which moderate the impact of winters in the North Atlantic.

We know that continued climate change will force almost all agricultural production north if you are in the northern hemisphere, or south if you are in the southern hemisphere which could create tens of millions of food refugees in the next few decades. Finally, it is nearly a certainty that by 2050, unless we do something to reverse this trend, we will have the loss of many, many cities along the coastal planes and whole island nations. Indeed, I often think about one of the nations that I have worked hard to help in the tsunami, the Maldives, a small country with only 130,000 people for which I have developed a great affection. My successor in interest at some future point will not have to worry about them anymore; we will just take a bunch of boats and take them away as their little nation vanishes under the water.

I speak of this in some length because I gave all kinds of climate change speeches when I was President and nobody even laughed, they just yawned. They were bored. They thought that my Vice President Al Gore and I were afflicted by some bookish disease and we read too many things that were confusing us. But if you want a disaster prevention system that works, we have to address this. We have to do more to address the underlying causes of vulnerability.

But I think there are some other things that we have to do as well. Even as we tackle climate change -- I hope that the Kyoto Protocol will lead to more carbon-trading systems as well as the development of clean energy systems and energy conservation systems. And I can't go any fur-

ther without complementing our host nation here: Germany is the number one producer of electricity from wind in the world. They have proved that if you get it to certain volumes with certain technologies, you can bring wind energy prices down to the cost of coal-generated electricity nearly anywhere. It just requires, like anything else, a certain amount of volume of production.

The Japanese are leading the world in solar energy. It's not as inexpensive yet, but there is all kinds of research going on, particularly using nano technology to spray the solar-generating capacity onto far less expensive metals which could change the economics of that. There are small solar packs now in use in a million homes, mostly in Latin America, which generate sufficient energy to heat the home and provide cooking and can be paid off in a year and a half for a month's supply of candles for the same price. If there are to be 500 million homes or a billion homes heated in such a fashion among poor people, that would be God-sent in warm climates, just enough electricity to turn on the lights and cook the food. And it would generate untold numbers of jobs. But anyway, I can see, as we used to say at home, that I am here preaching to the saved, so I won't belabor this. But this is very, very important.

In addition to that, there are other practical steps that we can take. We know that hazard and vulnerability mapping can give vital advance knowledge of potential risks and information on where best to invest to reduce suffering in the future. But awareness and knowledge do little if there is no actual implementation of the preparedness measures. In fact, it was right here in Bonn at the Second Early Warning Conference where participants spoke of the higher risk of devastating tsunamis in the Indian Ocean region, but there was no early warning system and now we are living with the results.

My government clearly was aware of the risk of New Orleans. Back in 2001, the Federal Emergency Management Agency said that there were three great threats to America that could cost a lot of lives. One was a terrorist attack on the East Coast, the other was a big earthquake on the West Coast, the third was a devastating hurricane which would wipe out New Orleans. But not only did we have inadequate preparedness, the very levees that were supposed to protect the people themselves were improperly constructed.

We know that urbanization, if managed properly, needs not increase risks, but there must be building codes and there can be building codes and standards even in poor countries that save lives. We know that if the mangrove trees had not been torn down anywhere where they previously stood in the tsunami-affected countries, the losses would have been substantially smaller in those places.

In the Kashmir earthquake last October, schools crumbled, crushing to death 18,000 students and nearly a thousand teachers. Even though it's a poor area, they could have had simple basic building standards which would have saved lives. I saw the same thing in 2001 in India, in Gujarat, where the earthquake did so much damage to hundreds of villages as well as the largest cities in the province.

When hurricane Luis hit Saint Martin in 1995, with stricter building codes on the French side of the island, the buildings there were far less damaged than those on the Dutch side, even though the center of the storm was closer to the French side.

We know that markets can be effectively harnessed to help households transfer risks and protect livelihoods. Micro insurance should be vastly expanded so that poor people around the world can transfer risk and recover more quickly. Only one percent of the households and businesses in low-income countries have any kind of catastrophic insurance coverage, compared with 30 percent in high-income countries.

We know that education and awareness can play a vital role and sometimes traditional knowledge is as good as science. When the tsunami hit Simeulue Island of Aceh, people rushed to the highlands. Only seven people out of the total population of 80,000 died. Early in the last century, Simeulue suffered a tsunami and through an oral history, generations of island residents had been

educated about changes in the oceans just before a tsunami strikes. That lore saved many thousands of lives.

While many prevention methods may seem expensive, we know that disaster prevention and preparedness in fact yields substantial economic returns. When I was President, the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, James Lee Witt, estimated that every dollar spent on disaster medication saves between 3 and 5 dollars in future economic losses – something all the wealthy countries who were donors in this effort would do well to remember when we are asked to keep on schedule and complete the early warning system for the Indian Ocean as well as to undertake other prevention and reduction efforts.

Early warning systems are the key to effective risk reduction. They do save lives and livelihoods. And, as I said, in the world we live in, with so much division between rich and poor, they also save an enormous amount of investment for the donor countries who will be called upon to help when people die from such disasters.

Bangladesh learned about the value of these things in 1970 when a cyclone resulted in more than 300,000 deaths. The government and people subsequently put in place effective early warning and preparedness measures involving modern cyclone-forecasting systems and more than 5,000 people to get the message to the villages. When a cyclone of similar force struck in 1997, 200 people were killed, which brings up to mind a point I want to make. The interesting thing to me is what Bangladesh did to marry old-fashioned communication with modern technology, the so-called 'last mile' of the early warning system. It's something that we dare not forget in our UN work for the tsunami and in general we dare not forget.

We know the most effective early warning takes more than scientifically advanced monitoring systems. All the sophisticated technology won't matter if we don't reach real communities and people. Satellites, buoys, data networks will make us safer, but we must invest in the training, the institution building, the awareness raising on the ground. If we want effective global early warning systems, we must work together, government to government, federal and local officials, scientists with policy makers, legislators with teachers and community leaders.

I hope very much that this Conference will lead to a new global effort to put in place effective early warning systems everywhere and to more comprehensive disaster reduction efforts. As documented by the Global Survey of Early Warning Systems unveiled by Jan Egeland on behalf of the Secretary-General earlier this morning, there are still big gaps in the early warning systems. In an all familiar pattern, developing countries, disproportionately affected by disasters, still often have ineffective or non-existent early warning systems.

So I urge all of you to support the implementation of the survey's recommendations for progress. And I hope you will be generous in funding, those of you who are funders, these early warning projects that you have on your desks this week. Their continued cost, their total cost of 200 million dollars is a tiny fraction of what we will spend just this year on humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of disasters and worth every dollar.

While planning to prevent these disasters in the future is very important, there are hundreds of thousands of people who are still recovering from a disaster: the tsunami, the Pakistani earthquake, the Gulf Coast hurricanes. These people must continue to be a priority. In the tsunami-affected region, we are working hard to help the survivors get back on their feet. Economic and social infrastructure was wiped out across the region. Homes and families, schools and teachers, health clinics were devastated. Recovery is going to take years, but we are making progress.

About 100,000 new homes have been built or are under construction today across the tsunami-affected region. Thousands more are in the pipeline. Some 400 permanent schools are under construction and with the work on temporary facilities, children went back to school more quickly than I thought they would. Tourist numbers are on the rebound in Thailand, in the Maldives. In Sri Lanka, over 70 percent of households are reported to have regained a steady income.

I am still frustrated that close to 50,000 people remain in tents in Aceh, but I am pleased that the temporary shelter construction has been moving much more rapidly.

Reconstruction in this region must be coupled with progress on risk reduction as well. There has been significant progress toward creation of an Indian Ocean tsunami early warning system with an interim system up and running by April of last year. With the help of the 29 nations engaged in the Indian Ocean process, they have quickly set up a regional network and they started to upgrade their telecommunication systems. The initial Indian Ocean system will be inaugurated by July of this year, with real-time data coming from new seismic tide gauge stations and buoys. I congratulate the governments for the work so far. I thank the donors that have helped financially, including our host government Germany.

But so much more needs to be done. The biggest challenge of an end-to-end warning system will lie in ensuring the last engineering mile, as I mentioned before, so that we are certain that the warnings not only reach communities on the coastline, but the communities and people know how to react.

The past few years have shown that disasters can strike anywhere any time. In the United States, hurricane Katrina was the most destructive disaster in our history, overwhelming an area across Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, about the size of the United Kingdom. More than 1,300 people were killed, hundreds of thousands were displaced, 400,000 jobs were lost. I have been working with former President Bush to raise money for Katrina relief and renewal. And we are trying to help the affected communities there. I am also trying to help the people there, again, who are most vulnerable, at least not to be left behind when it comes to receiving tax cuts and other benefits they have earned.

I was profoundly touched by the number of nations who gave aid to the United States, a wealthy country, many of them in response to what we have tried to do in the tsunami, where I must say – for all of my differences with the current administration – I was very proud of what my government did in tsunami relief, the military, the civilian agencies, the private, religious and non-religious groups. We have all learned a lot from the things that have happened. The question is whether we have learned enough.

Most governments here participated in Yokohama eleven years ago and more recently in the Kobe meeting that took place after the tsunami. Thanks to your efforts we now know much more about what we need to do to manage risk. The question is whether we will put what we know into action. In the end, disaster reduction is about making the right development choices: where to locate a school, how to protect buildings better, how to build them better, how to pursue sustainable development. It's about investing in practical and effective people-centered early warning systems. And it's about addressing the long-term challenges that will give us more natural disasters, particularly climate change.

I'd like to close with just a story to remind you of what this is all about. The last time I went to Aceh, I went to one of the camps for the internally displaced where there were thousands of people living. All these little communities, these little makeshift communities elect a community leader to represent them while they are there. I had at my side a young Indonesian woman who had been a television reporter. She quit her job to be an interpreter and to work with people in the camps until the reconstruction was done. So we walked into the camp and I was greeted by the elected leader of the community, a fellow just like everybody else living in the camp, and his wife and his son.

This little boy of theirs, nine years old, was the most beautiful child I have ever seen. It was shocking; I could hardly get my breath when I looked at him: luminous eyes, bright smile. So I said to my young interpreter: I believe that's the best-looking boy I ever saw in my life. She said: "Yes, he is a beautiful boy. And before the tsunami, he had nine brothers and sisters. Now they are all gone."

There are thousands upon thousands of stories like this every year. It's very important when we meet in these grand and beautiful places that we not forget what this is about.

The last stop I made in this little tent city was the Maternal and Child Health Clinic and as I was about to leave, the mother of this little boy who had lost nine of her own children came up to me holding a baby. She informed me that this baby was the youngest baby in the camp – it was two days old – and that she was bringing it to me because in their culture – I have to be careful here because it might be adopted everywhere – a woman does not get out of bed for 40 days after she gives birth. Her family simply cares for her and she rests for 40 days. On the 40th day she gets up and they name the kid. So this woman who has lost nine of her own children is holding this baby and says: “We want you to name this child.” So I looked at her and I said: What is the word in your language for “new beginning”? And she said: “Well, lucky for you, in our language the word ‘dawn’, which is a girl's name in English, is a boy's name. So we will call this boy Dawn. And whenever we see him, we will think of a new beginning.”

I could not imagine the courage of that mother having lost nine of her own children, holding that baby and smiling and talking about new beginnings. So think about them when you make these recommendations and when we see them through.

Thank you very much.