

**Third International Conference on Early Warning  
Bonn, Germany, 27-29 March 2006**

**Opening Address**

Mr Jan Egeland, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs,  
Emergency Relief Coordinator, and Chair of the International Strategy  
for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)

Minister Steinmeier, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

I am very pleased to address you today, on behalf of the United Nations, on the important issue of early warning of hazard events that lead to disasters. I want to thank the Government of Germany for hosting this conference, under the auspices of the United Nations, in the wonderful and historic city of Bonn. Bonn is home to several United Nations organisations, including, very appropriately, the UN-ISDR Platform for the Promotion for Early Warning.

The United Nations, through the ISDR – the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction – has worked closely with our German counterparts to help organise a very focused conference. A conference where we will ask – and provide answers to – sharp questions about how to make early warning systems a practical reality everywhere in the world.

Let me come quickly to the core issues we face. Floods, drought, wildfire, storms, tsunami, earthquakes and other types of natural hazards are increasingly affecting the world. In the decade 1976-1985, close to 1

billion people were affected by disasters – a huge number<sup>1</sup>. But by the most recent decade, 1996-2005, the decade total had more than doubled, to nearly two and a half billion people. We cannot let this trend continue. Disasters are eating away at our societies, destroying precious assets and livelihoods, and setting back the development of poor countries. We have the knowledge and we must act.

Let me remind you that there is a strong road map for action – the Hyogo Framework, which was agreed and committed to by governments, the UN and expert organisations just over a year ago at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Japan. In the Hyogo Framework, early warning is clearly identified as a priority area for action.

There is another story here I want to tell you – a very positive story – of a downward trend in the number of people killed in disasters. A few decades ago, over the ten years from 1956-1965, an astonishing total of 2.7 million people died in disasters. In the next ten year period, the total dropped to 1.9 million, and in the subsequent two ten-year periods to just over 1 million deaths and close to 0.5 million deaths respectively. In the last and most recent period, 1996-2005, the total was 0.9 million dead.

The overall message is very clear – disaster deaths have markedly reduced over the last 50 years – despite the rapid growth of world population over this time and the significant growth in the number of people affected by disasters that I noted a moment ago.

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<sup>1</sup> All data derived from the EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, [www.em-dat.net](http://www.em-dat.net), Université Catholique de Louvain - Brussels - Belgium"

So why have the death rates dropped?

The main reason is the absence of the massive losses of lives in floods and droughts that occurred in past years. For example, it is estimated that China lost 2 million people in the floods of July 1969, and that India lost 1.5 million people in the droughts and famine that spanned 1965, 1966 and 1967.

Big floods and droughts certainly continue to occur as always, but nowadays we are much better prepared, with early warning and response systems that enable us to avoid the losses. The data suggests that early warning and response systems may have saved the lives of over 3 million people over the last 40 years.

This is good news, inspiring news.

We should take this lesson and apply it to all natural hazards, however big or small, and to all corners of the world.

With this background, I am very glad to introduce and launch here today, an important new report, the Global Survey of Early Warning Systems.

In January 2005, following the tsunami disaster, Secretary General Kofi Annan called for a global early warning system for all hazards and all communities. Later, as a step toward this goal, he requested the ISDR secretariat and its UN partners to undertake a global survey of capacities, gaps and opportunities in respect to early warning systems<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Secretary-General's report "In larger freedom" report (A/59/2005, paragraph 66).

The survey has concluded that there are many gaps and shortcomings – as we have witnessed by recent experiences with the Indian Ocean tsunami, the hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, the famine in Niger, and the landslide in the Philippines. But it also has concluded that much progress has been made on early warning systems, and that great capabilities are available around the world.

What needs to be done to build better early warning systems is not a mystery, but has been already laid out in a succession of past documents and meetings. The survey's principal recommendation is that we should:

- 1. Develop a globally comprehensive early warning system, rooted in existing early warning systems and capacities**

The survey makes four other recommendations on key areas of need. Each is accompanied by a set of specific actionable tasks:

- 2. Build national people-centred early warning systems**
- 3. Fill the main gaps in global early warning capacities**
- 4. Strengthen the scientific and data foundations for early warning**
- 5. Develop the institutional foundations for a global early warning system**

You all have received a copy of the survey today. Your feedback will be very welcome. Please study its conclusions and recommendations, and more importantly, act on them.

I shall be promoting the survey conclusions with governments and through United Nations channels and shall be seeking prompt action on its recommendations.

Early warning is important across the whole humanitarian agenda, for both natural disasters and complex emergencies. Frequently they are interlinked, compounding the vulnerability of the poor and the weak. Recent commitments made by governments to strengthen the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) will enhance our capacity to respond effectively to early warnings of looming problems whether of natural or manmade origin.

Given the rising trends in disasters, we will lose the race unless we match the early warning and response efforts with similar commitments to reduce the causes of disaster risk. We need to use the Hyogo Framework to guide our actions and the ISDR-based International Early Warning Programme to facilitate joint efforts to improve early warning systems.

Let me leave you with note of three critical requirements, if we are to make substantive progress.

- We need to go to the people at risk, to help them understand what is at stake, and to get them actively involved in the development of their early warning systems.
- We need the political weight and commitment by governments, to protect their people with early warning systems

- And we need international support and funds to help countries develop their systems and be part of the global system

In conclusion, I call on you all to use the valuable opportunity of this conference to accelerate actions to establish the life-saving protection of people-centred early warning and response systems for all hazards and all communities.