

Translation

**Speech by Frank-Walter Steinmeier,
Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs,
at the opening of the Third International Conference on Early Warning
Bonn, 27 March 2006**

check against delivery

Ladies and gentlemen,
Jan Egeland,
Mayor Dieckmann,
Vice-President Sierra,
Excellencies,

It is my pleasure, on behalf of the Federal Government, to welcome you most warmly to Bonn, Germany's UN City, and in particular to the Third International Conference on Early Warning.

My thanks goes in particular to the Mayor and people of Bonn for your hospitality. I am sure that the next three days will prove to be not only exciting but also stimulating for all involved. And yesterday, in advance of the Conference, you organized a meeting of mayors from larger cities at which you discussed early warning issues. I thank you for this commitment.

Mr Egeland, I also would like to thank you for acting as patron of this Conference. The fact that the UN is involved in this event is a great honour to us Germans and a sign of recognition for our multilateral engagement. It is also an inducement to make this Conference a particular success.

Our aim for the next days is threefold: firstly, to demonstrate that early warning is of critical importance in minimizing the harm caused by disasters, secondly, to show where early warning is possible, and thirdly, to illustrate how we can jointly develop successful early warning systems.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am sure you all remember well how 26 December 2004 brought home to us the urgency of the subject of early warning and disaster reduction. On that day, 26 December 2004, the tsunami struck South and South East Asia, devastating vast tracts of land and causing unimaginable suffering – more than a quarter of a million people died in the region, countless more were left destitute with no means of earning a living.

As you know, the series of natural disasters has continued since the tsunami, leaving indelible images engraved on our minds. In August 2005 Hurricane Katrina battered the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, flooding much of New Orleans. In October 2005 the earthquake in Kashmir buried tens of thousands in their homes, wiping out whole settlements. And just over a month ago, a mudslide in the Philippines entombed the inhabitants of an entire village. Men, women and children died at work, at school and at home.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The impact of disasters of this kind is now international, not just regional. Natural disasters now affect and threaten us all, on the one hand because news from around the world can reach us almost instantaneously and on the other, because even the most remote regions are visited by tourists. This was illustrated with particular clarity by the tsunami – the victims came from a total of over 55 states.

But it is not only the impact that is so all-encompassing. People's solidarity with the victims of natural phenomena is now also global in reach. For example, the Germans donated over 600 million euro for the victims of the tsunami. The Federal Government made available a further 500 million euro for the reconstruction of damaged infrastructure. Some of this money is going towards the development of a tsunami early warning system.

Ladies and gentlemen,

After any disaster we have to ask ourselves what can we do to prevent the same thing happening again. What needs to be done to prevent natural hazards from turning into natural disasters? What measures must be taken so that the people affected receive help more quickly and efficiently and are in future better protected from the forces of nature?

For one thing is clear: we have to presume that natural disasters will remain a regular feature of our lives. It would be illusory to hope that we will in future be spared all droughts, earthquakes, floods and hurricanes.

For this reason humanitarian assistance will remain indispensable. People buried by earthquakes or marooned by floodwaters must of course be rescued and provided with the bare necessities – shelter, food and clothing.

However, since preventing harm is always preferable to salvaging what remains, it is crucial to set the focus firmly on disaster prevention. This rule most definitely applies when we are dealing not only with the life and health of individuals, but also with the immense suffering and large-scale destruction that natural disasters have brought to entire regions in recent years.

We at the Federal Foreign Office have for several years called for greater attention to be paid to disaster prevention by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. Two early warning conferences have already been held in Germany, the first one in Potsdam and the second one three years ago in Bonn. The mandate of the first conference was to produce a round-up of existing disaster reduction structures; the second conference was tasked with working out how the knowledge accumulated hitherto could be integrated into practical policies.

Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, has also called for a shift from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention. This focus on prevention can be justified not only for economic reasons – particularly relevant in times of limited resources – but also and above all for humanitarian reasons. Whenever we manage to prevent natural hazards from turning into disasters, we spare countless people untold suffering.

I am convinced that we should not accept disasters like the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake to be inevitable. Such disasters only result when natural forces collide with vulnerable infrastructures and insufficient foresight.

Often it is only human action or inaction that turns nature into a disaster, that raises the death toll and causes widespread damage. Nature is aided and abetted by social and political circumstances. Rapid population growth or festering poverty, or even unregulated economic growth are factors that play a role. These often lead to climate change, environmental destruction, uncontrolled building sprees or urbanization, which leave the people at the mercy of natural forces.

If we manage to reduce the vulnerability of certain regions – such as towns and villages by the sea or rivers or in earthquake zones – and improve early warning, we could protect human

lives and save property; we could open the door to economic growth in poorer regions and contribute to the sustainable use of natural resources.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Don't get me wrong. It would be presumptuous to think that we could learn to conquer the forces of nature. But we can and must be better prepared for them and find a wiser way of facing them. This realization is the point of departure for all efforts in the field of disaster reduction and early warning.

A Herculean task must be accomplished by us, and you in particular, in the next few days. We must draw up a systematic, global and comprehensive database of early warning capabilities in all risk areas.

We have to identify gaps in the existing early warning systems and to close them step by step through specific projects. To this end, we have to give the countries concerned the technological and financial help they need. It is particularly important for the media and schools to raise awareness among the people in the affected areas and to familiarize them with how early warning systems work. For, as you experts all know, even the most sophisticated alarms will have no effect if the people do not understand or heed them.

The German Federal Government is aware that we will not be able to complete the tasks I have just outlined as separate nations, but only by working together. I am thus glad that this Conference will contribute to the implementation of the goals that we have agreed at multi-lateral level, for example at the World Summit on Sustainable Development and in the Hyogo Framework of Action. We support the international endeavours of the United Nations and in particular its International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, whose Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning here in Bonn is financed by the Federal Government.

Ladies and gentlemen,

More people die today as a result of natural disasters than as a consequence of war. The issue addressed by this conference is thus of prime political importance and requires no further justification.

We have chosen "From Concept to Action" as our conference motto, for the time has come to develop concrete solutions for the various early-warning needs.

For this reason, the conference participants will over the next few days present and debate concrete project proposals on early-warning systems. We will be looking at examples developed on all continents to cope with various types of disaster – earthquakes, tsunamis, hurri-

canes, landslides and droughts. In this way we hope to show what concrete form early warning takes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Permit me to close by referring to one particular event that had a great impact on me.

There are video recordings of 26 December 2004, the day the floods caused by the tsunami swamped South and South East Asia. These recordings show how, after the submarine earthquake, the villagers on a small island in the Indian Ocean dropped whatever they were doing and ran away from the sea and the beach, heading straight for the nearest hill. The children later reported that their grandparents had taught them to recognize the signs of a seaquake and told them how to react. The next image in the film is of the villagers standing safely on higher ground. Before their eyes, the lethal wave crashed over their homes, their possessions and their food supplies. But nobody was hurt, all the villagers had run to safety.

This example shows that early warning works in many ways – and sometimes without fancy technology and massive investment. Our task today is to make use of all conceivable options – high technology as well as traditional knowledge. This is why early warning and disaster relief alike are tasks that require international solidarity and cooperation.

Let this please be the message that goes out from Bonn. I wish you all good luck in making this conference a great success, for the sake of us all!

Thank you.