

UN ANNOUNCES NEW CONFERENCE ON EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AGAINST NATURAL HAZARDS

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Pushing ahead with Secretary-General Kofi Annan's call for global early warning systems covering all countries and all hazards, the United Nations today announced the convening of a new conference next year to reinforce lessons learned from last December Indian Ocean tsunami with fresh initiatives in high priority countries.

"Early warning and preparedness are the critical elements in preventing natural hazards from turning into disasters," Salvano Briceño, Director of the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (<<http://www.unisdr.org>> ISDR) said of the 3rd International Early Warning Conference (<<http://www.ewc3.org/>> EWCIII) to be convened by the Government of Germany under UN auspices in Bonn from 27 to 29 March.

"Through the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster in December 2004, the world was reminded of the crucial importance of efficient early warning systems," he added.

Had a tsunami early warning system that now exists only for the volcano- and earthquake-prone Pacific Rim been operational in the Indian Ocean, the human toll might only have been a fraction of its more than 200,000 total, since tremor and tidal gauges, fast data transfer, alarm mechanisms and training in danger zones would have provided ample time for hundreds of thousands of people to flee to higher ground.

Guided by the motto 'From Concept to Action,' EWCIII follows the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) in Kobe, Japan, earlier this year and aims to implement its 'Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015,' which calls for putting disaster risk at the centre of national policies, strengthening the capacity of disaster-prone countries to address risk, and investing heavily in disaster preparedness.

"The conference's main outcome will be the launch of a range of short- and long-term early warning projects in high priority countries," Mr. Briceño said.

The meeting is expected to bring together over 600 representatives of governments, parliaments and international organizations, as well as practitioners and members of the scientific community. The Conference Secretariat will be located within the ISDR secretariat.

In a message in January to a conference in Phuket, Thailand, on a tsunami early-warning system, Mr. Annan said such systems should be under the coordination of the UN. "Our challenge now is to ensure that all the elements of an effective early warning system are integrated and cohesive, especially since so many different actors will be involved," he added.