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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR DISASTER REDUCTION
14 October 2009

Beyond their practical importance, hospitals and health facilities have a unique value as symbols of public well-being. Making them safe from disasters is essential. That is why the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, along with the World Health Organization and the World Bank, marks the International Day for Disaster Reduction by highlighting the 2008-09 World Disaster Reduction Campaign dedicated to Hospitals Safe from Disasters.

When disaster strikes, hospitals are the most critical infrastructure. They represent – quite literally – the lifeblood of a community. If hospitals are severely damaged, efforts to save lives are seriously impeded. With weather-related disasters on the increase, it is critical to ensure that health facilities are prepared for emergencies and able to provide life-saving care in their wake. This is particularly true in countries where weak health systems already struggle to meet the health needs of populations. In Burkina Faso, flooding forced the evacuation of the patients from the main hospital in the capital city. In Indonesia, hospital collapses during the earthquake in Sumatra caused additional loss of life. In L'Aquila, Italy, the collapse of a newly built hospital provided a grim reminder that health systems in richer nations are also at risk.

The Safe Hospitals campaign involves practical steps to make hospitals safer. For example, the Hospital Safety Index, a checklist for assessing hospital preparedness, has been applied to many facilities in Latin America and elsewhere, including Oman, Sudan and Tajikistan.

I call on Governments and all decision-makers, including town planners, to review hospital safety. Health facilities must be better prepared to respond to local hazards. They must be designed, built and maintained so they can better protect health workers and patients alike when disaster hits. The cost of making hospitals safe from disasters is relatively small. The most expensive hospital is the one that fails.