



THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON DISASTER REDUCTION: 18-22 JANUARY 2005

The United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) opens today at the Portopia Hotel, in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. The WCDR is supported by the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), which has been designated as the Conference Secretariat. Over 5,000 participants are expected to attend the WCDR, including representatives of governments, UN specialized agencies, other intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The WCDR aims to increase the international profile of disaster risk reduction, promote its integration into development planning and practice, and strengthen local and national capacities to address the causes of disasters that hamper development in many countries. WCDR participants are expected to discuss three outcome documents: a review of the 1994 Yokohama Strategy for a Safer World and its Plan of Action; a programme of action for 2005-2015; and a political declaration.

The WCDR is organized into three segments: an Intergovernmental Segment, a Thematic Segment, and a Public Forum. Under the Intergovernmental Segment, negotiations on the outcome documents will take place. The Thematic Segment includes panel presentations and sessions on five themes: governance, institutional and policy frameworks for risk reduction; risk identification, assessment, monitoring and early warning; knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience; reducing the underlying risk factors; and preparedness for effective response. The Thematic Segment will also include regional sessions, and three high-level round tables that will address: "Disaster risks: the next development challenge," "Learning to live with risk," and "Emerging risks: what will tomorrow hold?" The Public Forum will include workshops, exhibition booths and poster sessions. In response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, the WCDR is also scheduled to hold additional sessions on early warning for tsunamis.

The convening of the WCDR coincides with the tenth anniversary of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, and a memorial ceremony commemorating the victims was held in Kobe on Monday, 17 January.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF UN DISASTER MANAGEMENT

In recent years, disaster reduction has become an increasingly important issue on the international agenda. Hazards, including floods, droughts, storms, landslides, earthquakes, tsunamis and

epidemics are having an increasing impact on humans, due to population growth and urbanization, rising poverty and the onset of global environmental changes, including climate change, desertification and biodiversity loss. Most policymakers and academics acknowledge that poor planning, poverty and a range of other underlying factors create vulnerability resulting in insufficient capacity or measures to reduce the potential negative consequences of risk. This vulnerability contributes as much to the magnitude of disasters as do the natural hazards themselves. Thus, hazards only result in disasters if high risk conditions are present. Many experts consider that action to reduce risk is now essential to improve social protection for vulnerable communities in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: An increase in human casualties and property damage in the 1980s motivated the UN General Assembly in 1989 to declare the 1990s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) (resolution 44/236). The aim of the IDNDR was to address disaster prevention in the context of a range of hazards, including earthquakes, windstorms, tsunamis, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, grasshopper and locust infestations, and drought and desertification.

YOKOHAMA STRATEGY AND PLAN OF ACTION: One of the main outcomes of the IDNDR was the Yokohama Strategy for a Safer World and its Plan of Action, adopted in 1994 at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction held in Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan. The Yokohama Strategy sets guidelines for action on prevention, preparedness and mitigation of disaster risk. These guidelines are based on a set of Principles that stress the importance of risk assessment, disaster prevention and preparedness, the capacity to prevent, reduce and mitigate disasters, and early warning. The Principles stem from the recognition that preventive measures are most effective when stakeholders at all levels are involved, and that vulnerability can be reduced by applying "proper design" and "patterns of development" focused on target groups. The Principles also state that the international community should share technology to prevent, reduce and mitigate disasters, and demonstrate a strong political determination in the field of disaster reduction.

INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DISASTER REDUCTION: At its 54th session in 1999, the UN General Assembly decided to continue the activities on disaster prevention and vulnerability reduction carried out during the IDNDR. It thus established the ISDR, which is supported by the



scientific and technical expertise and knowledge accumulated during the IDNDR. An Inter-Agency Secretariat and an Inter-Agency Task Force for Disaster Reduction (IATF) for the implementation of the ISDR were also established (resolutions 54/219 and 56/195 respectively). Among its mandated tasks, the IATF convenes *ad hoc* expert meetings on issues related to disaster reduction. Its tenth meeting was held in Geneva from 7-8 October 2004.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 58/214: In February 2004, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 58/214, deciding to convene the WCDR. The resolution sets out the objectives of the WCDR, which are to: conclude the review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action with a view to updating the guiding framework on disaster reduction for the 21st century; identify specific activities aimed at ensuring the implementation of relevant provisions of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI), adopted in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD); share best practices and lessons learned for supporting and facilitating disaster reduction within the context of attaining sustainable development, and identify gaps and challenges; increase awareness of the importance of disaster reduction policies to facilitate and promote their implementation; and increase the reliability and availability of appropriate disaster-related information to the public and disaster management agencies in all regions, as set out in the relevant provisions of the JPOI.

PREPARATORY PROCESS: Following the adoption of resolution 58/214, a WCDR Preparatory Committee was established and charged with the preparation of the outcome documents for adoption at the WCDR: a political declaration with a strategic vision to reduce risk and vulnerability to natural and technological hazards in the period 2005-2015; and a programme document containing elements for policy measures to implement the strategic vision set out in the declaration, tentatively entitled "Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters: [Hyogo] Framework for Action, 2005-2015." An ongoing review of the implementation of the 1994 Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action provides the context for these documents.

Prepcom I: The first session of the WCDR Preparatory Committee was held in Geneva, Switzerland, from 6-7 May 2004. The meeting addressed procedural issues, including the adoption of the provisional rules of procedure of the WCDR, organization of work and suggested arrangements for accreditation and participation in the preparatory process and the WCDR. Delegates also heard a progress report on the preparatory process of the WCDR, and discussed the draft annotated outline of the review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action and the proposed elements for the WCDR programme of action.

Prepcom II: The second session of the WCDR Preparatory Committee convened in Geneva from 11-12 October 2004. Delegates considered a new version of the draft framework for action. In addition, delegates addressed: the accreditation of NGOs and other major groups to the preparatory process and the WCDR; the provisional rules of procedure for the preparatory process and the WCDR; the proposed format and draft agenda of the WCDR; and the proposed "partnerships mechanism." Delegates also heard a progress report on the WCDR preparatory process and discussed the draft review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action. At the conclusion of the second session, the Preparatory Committee agreed to establish an open-ended drafting committee to continue working on the draft programme of action and consider the draft political declaration.

DRAFTING GROUP: The drafting committee, attended by 54 countries, met regularly in Geneva until 14 January 2005, and negotiated the draft programme outcome document, which was released on 21 December 2004. Remaining unresolved issues include: definitions and scope of the hazards addressed by the WCDR, and whether technological and environmental risks and disasters should also be considered; linking risk reduction to climate change; financial resources; reference to related intergovernmental processes, currently outlined in the Annex to the document; and regional responsibilities, such as cross-border river-basin management. The drafting committee also commented on the draft political declaration, which will be addressed at the WCDR by a contact group.

INTERSESSIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

UNFCCC COP-10: The tenth Conference of the Parties (COP-10) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) met in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 6-17 December 2004. Over 6,100 participants were in attendance. Throughout COP-10, Parties exchanged views on UNFCCC activities relevant to other intergovernmental meetings, including the WCDR. In the final decision, the COP notes that Parties held an exchange of views and requested the Secretariat to report on relevant UNFCCC activities to the WCDR. However, text referring to reporting back to the UNFCCC's COP on the WCDR was omitted.

INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI: On 26 December 2004, an earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale occurred off the west coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, triggering a massive tsunami that spread across the Indian Ocean in just a few hours, affecting the coastlines of at least 12 countries and leading to the deaths of over 160,000 people, and the loss of livelihoods of millions. The international community responded with significant humanitarian relief and financial donations to affected regions. Aid conferences were held on 6 and 12 January 2005, in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Geneva, respectively, resulting in the announcement of the development of a tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean, and enhancing the international relief effort, which is mobilized by the UN.

INTERNATIONAL MEETING TO REVIEW THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BPOA: The ten-year review of the implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA) on the sustainable development of small island developing States (SIDS) was held from 10-14 January 2005 in Port Louis, Mauritius. The intergovernmental negotiations focused on concluding the Mauritius Strategy for the further implementation of the BPOA. The Mauritius Strategy notes that SIDS have undertaken to strengthen their national frameworks for more effective disaster management and are committed, with the necessary support of the international community, to: strengthening the ISDR and related SIDS regional mechanisms as facilities to improve national disaster mitigation, preparedness and early-warning capacity, increasing public awareness about disaster reduction, stimulating interdisciplinary and intersectoral partnerships, and mainstreaming risk management into the national planning process; using opportunities, such as the WCDR, to consider the specific concerns of SIDS, including issues relating to insurance and reinsurance arrangements for SIDS; and augmenting the capacity of SIDS to predict and respond to natural and environmental disasters.

Participants also adopted a Mauritius Declaration, which, *inter alia*, points to the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as an indication of the need to develop and strengthen effective disaster risk reduction, early warning systems, emergency relief, and rehabilitation and reconstruction capacities.