WCDR HIGHLIGHTS:
TUESDAY, 18 JANUARY 2005

The World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR) opened on Tuesday, 18 January, in Kobe, Hyogo, Japan. The Conference heard opening statements, addressed organizational matters and established a Main Committee to discuss the WCDR draft programme outcome document (framework for action) and declaration. The Main Committee held its first meeting in the afternoon. In the Thematic Segment, two high-level round tables took place, and sessions of the five thematic clusters were convened.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL SEGMENT

OPENING: Sálvano Briceño, Director, ISDR Secretariat, invited Jan Egeland, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to open the WCDR. Egeland welcomed participants and the Emperor and Empress of Japan. A moment of silence was observed in memory of the lives lost during the Indian Ocean disaster in December 2004.

Opening statements: Numerous speakers expressed sympathy for the countries affected by the Indian Ocean disaster. In a video message, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed the timeliness of the WCDR, and expressed hope that it would contribute to building community resilience, mobilizing resources, and galvanizing global actions.

Egeland said disaster risk reduction is not an additional expense, but an essential investment and a moral imperative, and proposed that a portion of emergency relief spending be earmarked for disaster risk reduction.

Japan's Emperor Akihito stressed the importance of learning from past disasters and said Japanese technology could contribute to saving lives around the world.

Yoshitaka Murata, Japan's Minister of State for Disaster Management, gave examples of resilience-building efforts and underlined the importance of multi-stakeholder participation.

Toshizo Ido, Hyogo Governor, invited participants to visit the public forum and attend the special sessions on tsunami early warning systems.

Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi outlined his country's relief and recovery efforts following the Indian Ocean disaster, and stressed the importance of learning lessons from past disasters.

Election of the President and other officers: Egeland noted that the Bureau of the Preparatory Committee will continue to serve as the WCDR Bureau. The Conference endorsed the proposal for Yoshitaka Murata to serve as Conference President, and endorsed the following Vice-Presidents: Hernán Escudero (Ecuador); Hans-Joachim Daerr (Germany); Mohammad Hossein Moghimi (Iran); Omar Hilale (Morocco); and Yury Brazhnikov

(Russian Federation). Mohammad Hossein Moghimi will also serve as Rapporteur.

Provisional rules of procedure: President Murata recalled that the EU and US had been unable to reach agreement on the changes to the provisional rules of procedure proposed at the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee. He noted that discussion on the disputed elements continues, and proposed the application of the rest of the rules.

Adoption of the agenda: The Conference adopted the agenda (A/CONF.206/1), taking note of additional sessions on the Indian Ocean disaster.

Organization of work: The Conference adopted the WCDR format and work schedule. President Murata proposed to establish a Main Committee charged with completing negotiations on the draft framework for action and declaration, to be chaired by Marco Ferrari (Switzerland). Participants adopted the proposal.

General statements: Numerous countries expressed gratitude to the Government of Japan for hosting the WCDR, and conveyed sympathy to the countries affected by the Indian Ocean disaster. CHINA expressed willingness to establish regional surveillance and early warning systems, share relevant data, and support developing countries in capacity building and technical expertise. INDIA, UGANDA and KAZAKHSTAN reported on national efforts and strategies for disaster reduction. INDIA outlined his country's work on an Indian Ocean early warning system for tsunamis, and, with UGANDA, stressed the importance of regional cooperation. Luxembourg, for the EU, underscored the importance of early warning, good governance, stakeholder participation and linkages with relevant international environmental agreements. GERMANY, supported by the EU, proposed hosting an international conference on early warning in 2005.

MAIN COMMITTEE: Chair Marco Ferrari pointed to a paper submitted by the Secretariat, which contains alternative language for bracketed text emerging from informal consultations held after the release of the draft framework for action on 21 December 2004. Discussion focused on bracketed text, starting with the preamble of the draft framework.

Following discussion, delegates agreed to define "hazards" as events, phenomena, activities or conditions originating from both natural and human-induced processes. On the scope of the framework for action, delegates agreed that this would encompass disasters caused by hazards of natural origin and related environmental and technological hazards and risks.

On whether to refer to "human security" or "the security of humankind," CUBA, supported by many others, proposed to refer to the "survival, dignity and livelihoods of individuals." JAPAN requested retaining "human security" as well.

Delegates debated reference to "climate change" extensively,

with the US insisting on the deletion of the word "climate." This was supported by AUSTRALIA and CANADA, but opposed by the EU, BANGLADESH and several SIDS delegates. The US objected to "excerpting" conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Third Assessment Report on the likelihood of climate change, a view shared by several delegates. The discussion was inconclusive, and will resume on Wednesday. Delegates also agreed to mention HIV/AIDS as a factor compounding disaster risk.

THEMATIC SEGMENT

HIGH-LEVEL ROUND TABLES: Disaster risk – the next development challenge: This round table was facilitated by Yvette Stevens, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

In a recorded message, James Wolfensohn, President, World Bank, emphasized the link between poverty and disaster reduction efforts and noted that the economic impact of disasters in low-income countries often represents a high percentage of GDP. Sadako Ogata, President, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), said empowering local communities is key to disaster preparedness and outlined JICA's technical cooperation activities. Gareth Thomas, UK International Development Minister, said the WCDR's challenge is to raise the profile of disaster reduction on the development agenda and come up with practical solutions.

Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director, UNEP, called for mainstreaming disaster reduction in development strategies and underlined the high returns, in terms of risk reduction, of environmentally sound activities. Zephirin Diabre, Associate Administrator, UNDP, underscored the need for capacity building, good governance and coordination of disaster risk management. Geert van der Linden, Vice President, Asian Development Bank, noted a paradigm shift from disaster response to mitigation and preparedness. Bernd Hoffmann, Director, German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), called for increased funding for, and integration of, disaster reduction in development programmes.

In the ensuing discussion, participants addressed the adoption of time-bound targets, funding issues, technical cooperation, and mainstreaming risk reduction in the development agenda.

Learning to live with risk: This round table was facilitated by Peter Walker, Director of the Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University.

Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General, UNESCO, noted the 2005 launch of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, stressing that it must include knowledge and training for disaster reduction. Corazon Alma de Leon, former Chair of the Mount Pinatubo Commission, presented the Philippines' successful school-based community mobilization programme for responding to hazards. Toshizo Ido described reconstruction since the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and highlighted the Kobe Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution and its role as a learning center for future generations.

Edgardo Calderón Paredes, Chair, Disaster Preparedness and Relief Commission of the International Federation of the Red Cross, described the complex and reciprocal relationship between vulnerability and development. Hans Van Ginkel, UN University Rector, called for improved knowledge of risks and vulnerabilities through site-specific and targeted research and learning, and stressed the need to prepare for the unexpected and incorporate disaster management into sustainable development.

In the discussion, participants highlighted: civil input into reconstruction; the protection of national treasures; traditional knowledge; and voter support for disaster preparedness policies. One speaker suggested incorporating monitoring and feedback mechanisms as well as sanctions into the outcome documents, and another proposed setting education targets for 2010.

THEMATIC CLUSTERS: Cluster 4 Panel: Reducing the underlying risk factors: This panel was chaired by Borbély

László, Romania's Minister Delegate for Public Works and Territory Management.

Yong Sung Park, Chair, International Chamber of Commerce, discussed the role of the private sector in disaster management. Tsuneo Okada, Director-General, Japanese Disaster Prevention Association, stressed the need to retrofit existing buildings to new standards. Rocío Sáenz, Costa Rica's Minister of Health, outlined Latin America's experience with hospital vulnerability. Svein Tveitdal, Director, UNEP's Division of Environmental Policy Implementation, highlighted links with the UNFCCC, and noted UNEP's intention to establish, with ISDR, a global programme focusing on environmental management in disaster risk reduction. Speaking on behalf of David Nabarro, WHO Office of the Director-General for Health Action in Crises, Wilfried Kreisel, Director, WHO Kobe Centre, called attention to the health sector's vulnerability to disasters.

Kazunobu Onogawa, Director, UN Centre for Regional Development, recommended that, by 2015, countries incorporate community-based disaster management into local and national development policies and ensure that schools and hospitals are disaster resistant. Amod Dixit, Secretary General, Nepal's National Society for Earthquake Technology, said underlying risks are known, and outlined targets for building codes. Jamilah Mahmood, Chair, Working Committee of the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network, said women and children are most vulnerable. She emphasized women's central role in non-formal education and the importance of civil society as first responders.

In the discussion, comments focused on gender issues, the lack of common terminology and framework, an Indian Ocean early warning system, and the relevance of the MDGs.

Cluster 5: Telecommunication saves lives – the role of information and communication technologies: This session was facilitated by Cosmas Zavazava, Head, Unit for LDCs and Focal Point for Emergency Telecommunications of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). He highlighted ITU's ongoing work in the area of emergency communications, and stressed the critical role that telecommunications play in all aspects of disaster mitigation.

Samer Halawi, Regional Director for the Middle East and Africa, Inmarsat Limited, gave examples of existing satellite communication technologies saving lives and easing relief operations. He explained the activities of Télécoms sans Frontières in helping establish communications for affected communities. Naoko Iwasaki, Assistant Director, International Cooperation Division, ITU Information and Communication Technologies Center, Waseda University, highlighted the role of universities in disaster management and their cooperation with government and business. Gary Fowlie, Chief of Media Relations and Public Information, ITU, spoke on the contribution of activities under the World Summit on the Information Society.

In the ensuing discussion, questions were raised on: improving access of developing countries and vulnerable communities to communication systems; the costs of modern communication technologies; ITU initiatives on disaster management; and the role of global education on risk reduction.

IN THE CORRIDORS

On Tuesday, the impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami was clear as the opening of the Conference attracted high-level attendees, including the Japanese Emperor and Empress and the Prime Minister, as well as numerous heads of UN and other agencies. Observers commented on the surge in attention, particularly from media, and the declarations of strong commitment to action. On the other hand, while negotiations on the draft framework for action got off to a productive start with language on definition and scope agreed, the issue of whether to link climate change with disasters rose to the fore. This would mark the second conference in as many weeks where the political dimensions of the climate change debate threaten to derail negotiations.