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PRESS RELEASE

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World experts unite to confront growing risks of disasters

Some of the world's greatest cities risk becoming disaster hotspots, delegates from 120 nations warned today in Geneva at the close of the world's first Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Over the past 30 years the number of storms, droughts, and floods has increased threefold. The numbers affected by disasters have increased fivefold. Today, eight of the world's ten most populous cities are prone to earthquakes and six of them are on or near the coast. One billion people live in unstable, overcrowded slums. The effects of climate change are expected to increase the risks significantly.

Tokyo, Mumbai, Shanghai, Jakarta and Dhaka are examples of rapidly-growing cities that are simultaneously vulnerable to earthquakes, cyclones, tsunamis and storm surges.

“At least half of the countries of the world have started to implement the Hyogo Framework for Action agreed by 168 nations in Kobe, Japan in January 2005. But we want every country to take up the challenge,” said John Holmes, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, chairman of the conference. “There is still a huge amount to do. International effort must concentrate on those countries that are most vulnerable to natural hazards. But, too often, international funding for risk reduction is inadequate and uncoordinated.”

Experts among more than 1,000 delegates warned that one single catastrophic disaster could wipe out decades of development investment, as well as claim thousands of lives and impose a cruel economic burden upon the survivors.

The platform also gave a strong voice to a wide range of non-governmental organisations involved in emergency relief, development, and education. “For the

first time,” said Mr. Holmes, “everybody – the UN, the NGOs, the private sector, academic institutions, disaster experts and local authorities– are working together. Disaster risk reduction is everybody’s business.”

Among the initiatives launched at the Global Platform are the Capacity for Disaster Reduction Initiative (CADRI) which will unite three UN agencies and bring new expertise to reinforce the capacity of nations and communities to confront disaster; and the Forum for Cities, announced by four UN agencies to address natural hazards and urban vulnerability.

Conference delegates also supported a study, to be completed by 2009, on the costs and benefits of reducing vulnerability to natural hazards. Professor Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize-winning economist, has agreed to advise the researchers.

“Disaster risk reduction policies are urgent, necessary, efficient, and effective. They are the best tools we have to save lives and assets and are the best investments countries, cities, and local communities can make. We know what to do. Now we need action,” said Mr. Holmes.