



PRESS RELEASE

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Where are the safest places on earth from sudden onset hazard?

Geneva, 15 June 2009: A major conference opening in Geneva, Switzerland tomorrow (Tuesday) will hear details of the world's safest places and those most threatened by sudden onset hazard.

The information is drawn from a new Mortality Risk Index (MRI) to be outlined at the Second Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) attended by some 1,800 participants comprising Government leaders and risk reduction specialists from around the world, representing more than 300 governments and regional/national DRR organizations.

The MRI itself is the product of a massive database which underpins the *Global Assessment Report: Risk and Poverty in a Changing Climate*, a landmark document launched in Bahrain last month by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. In essence, it lists some 200 countries and territories within 10 sudden onset risk categories, ranging from extreme (six territories) through to negligible (11). The categories with the highest number of entries are 'medium' and 'medium low' with a combined total of 118 – more than half the listing.

Using the Index, it is also possible to identify multi/combined, relative and absolute risk by territory, covering four sudden onset hazards which form the bulk of natural hazard events – tropical cyclones, earthquakes, floods and landslides. Compiling the Index has entailed a complex two-year modeling of hazard mapping, exposure calculations and vulnerability analysis, calibrated by each territory's disaster history over more than three decades, to provide a state-of-the-art global profile of sudden onset hazard mortality.

The Index reveals, for instance, that Bahrain itself, like a number of the Gulf States is, for now, among the safest places on earth from sudden onset hazard among a grouping which includes Denmark, Estonia, Greenland, Latvia, Qatar, Seychelles and the United Arab Emirates.

"In today's world, no location can be considered as safe from sudden onset or weather-related hazard," stresses Margareta Wahlstrom, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction. "Greenland, for instance is already significantly affected by climate change, while the Seychelles was struck by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and rising sea levels are a growing concern for Bahrain.

"The clock is ticking and it is more essential than ever before for Governments to devise and implement real and sustainable risk reduction solutions – such as investing in disaster proofing of schools and hospitals – at both national and community levels."

Predictably, four large population countries – Bangladesh, China, India and Indonesia – occupy the 'extreme' category for average numbers of citizens at risk, followed by Colombia, Myanmar and Pakistan ('major') with the next listing ('very high') including: Afghanistan, Algeria, Congo (DR), Guatemala, Iran, Japan, Peru, Philippines, Romania and Uzbekistan.

However, when the risk relative to population is analyzed, a different scenario emerges and territories topping the scale are: Colombia, Comoros, Dominica, Guatemala, Myanmar and Vanuatu. Significantly various small island states – Fiji, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Sao Tome and Principe, St Kitts and Nevis and St Lucia – feature prominently in the subsequent ('high') category.

Adds Wahlstrom: "It is hardly surprising that the world's two most populated countries, China and India, have large numbers of their citizens at risk from sudden onset hazard. The solid risk reduction work already undertaken by both these Governments in particular, must continue.

“But even more worrying are the trends in middle and low income countries and small island developing states where a rising proportion of communities are caught in the disaster risk-climate change continuum, driving a cycle of deprivation and vulnerability in which more and more people become trapped.

“Fortunately, public awareness of disaster risk reduction issues and initiatives is intensifying and more questions are being asked of governments. The Global Platform will be a pivotal conference, not only in setting the disaster risk reduction agenda for the coming two years and beyond, but also in the run up to sealing a deal on climate change adaptation in Copenhagen this December.”

Explains Pascal Peduzzi – Scientific Adviser for the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction – who coordinated a team of 20 leading scientists to develop the ground-breaking database: “Risk is made of three components: hazard, exposure and vulnerability. Each component varies with different parameters: hazard can vary in frequency, strength, exposure in number and vulnerability is shaped by poverty, remoteness, quality of governance, rapidity of urban growth and other contextual parameters.

“But knowing where hazard strikes and who is exposed is not enough. We need to understand why separate populations – broadly similar in size and demographics – that are affected by a comparable strength of events suffer a different proportion of losses? This leads to the question of measuring vulnerability.

“The research from which the MRI has emerged is founded on an innovative methodology which allows vulnerability parameters, to be gauged through in-depth scrutiny – for calibration purposes – of every relevant hazardous event since the mid-1970s. It is then possible to reapply the vulnerabilities into the current context and overlay this with the exposure and severity of the different hazards to obtain the risk.

“The next challenge is to expand the Index to reflect the exigencies of drought. The absence of this input to the current Index means that the information on Africa, especially, is unbalanced since many countries in this region are affected by slow onset disaster, for which we were not able to devise a suitable model for this project.”

Notes to Editors

1. The Second Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction 2009 (GP09) – which takes place from 16 to 19 June 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland – is a biennial event first staged in 2007 intended to bring together some 1,500 participants including heads of state, senior ministers, UN agencies, NGOs, scientific and technical experts. Essentially, it is the world's principal gathering dedicated to taking forward the disaster risk reduction imperative.

2. The first edition of the biennial *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction: Reducing Risk in a Changing Climate*, launched in the Kingdom of Bahrain on 17 May 2009, offers government leaders and their advisers – striving for a safer world in the face of burgeoning natural hazard – a treasure trove of technical and statistical analysis, underpinning clear-cut counsel and guidance on essential action for the future. Its primary focus is to catalyze international attention on the challenge and opportunities of disaster risk and to consolidate political and economic support and commitment to risk reduction intervention.

3. The mandate of United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) is to act as the focal point in the United Nations system for the coordination of disaster reduction and to ensure that disaster risk reduction becomes integral to sound and equitable development, environmental protection and humanitarian action. Its mission is to be an effective coordinator and guide for all the ISDR partners, globally and regionally.

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