



PRESS RELEASE

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Governments ‘must invest today for safer tomorrow’ – pivotal disaster risk reduction conference opens in Geneva.

Geneva, 16 June: Leaders and representatives from some 165 Governments gathering here today for a pivotal disaster risk reduction conference will be urged to ‘invest today for a safer tomorrow’ – or face much harder decisions in the years to come.

In a world increasingly affected by climate change, ‘the time is long overdue to move disaster risk reduction to the centre of the development agenda’, says John Holmes, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Convener of the Second Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, taking place in Geneva from 16 through 19 June 2009.

Global disaster statistics and trends are ‘of grave concern’, stresses Holmes:

- Last year, 236,000 people lost their lives in over 300 disasters – in earthquakes, floods, storms, landslides and other destructive events. More than 200 million people were directly affected, and damages exceeded 180 billion US dollars.
- The world’s combined disaster management mechanisms can assist at most 100 million people at any one time, while the projected need is three times that figure.
- Between 1980 and 2007, nearly 8,400 disasters caused by natural hazards have taken the lives of over two million people and produced economic losses over 1.5 million US dollars. Of this total, around 90 per cent of the events, and over 70 per cent of casualties and 75 per cent of economic losses were caused by weather-, climate- or water-related extremes such as droughts, floods, windstorms, tropical cyclones and storm surges, extreme temperatures, or by wild fires, health epidemics and insect infestations, which are directly linked to meteorological and hydrological conditions.
- While no individual event is, by itself, evidence of climate change, the IPCC’s Fourth Assessment Report indicates that changing frequencies of a number of extreme events can be expected in a warming world. Oman – where even weak tropical cyclones are practically unknown – was struck by a Category 5 incident in 2007; while Brazil was hit by a similar event three years earlier, the first ever in the South Atlantic.

“We now know that disasters are increasing in most regions of the world,” adds Holmes. “Losses are rising. Poor urban governance, vulnerable rural livelihoods and declining ecosystems are key drivers of growing disaster risks, magnified by climate change. Disasters lead to poverty and poverty leads to disasters, with developing countries disproportionately affected.”

Attended by more than 1,800 delegates drawn from over 300 Governments and regional/national organisations, the Platform will conclude on Friday (19 June). The aim is to reach a common understanding on a series of measurable and sustainable disaster risk reduction (DRR) actions – covering early warning systems, disaster-proofing public buildings and minimum levels of development funding directed towards disaster risk reduction.

The Platform is expected to focus on four vital areas of the DRR imperative:

- Increased investment in DRR – ‘a fundamental requirement’;
- Integration of DRR into climate change adaptation and development planning;
- Acceleration of community resilience and livelihood protection;
- A programme to accelerate disaster-proofing of public buildings – especially schools and hospitals.

“Put plainly, disaster risk reduction is not an option. It is an absolute pre-requisite for a safer future,” states Holmes, who is also the Chair of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) partnership.

ISDR partners actively involved in the Platform are also expressing strong support for the event’s overall objectives.

"It is vital that we invest more in disaster risk reduction so as to protect health," says Dr Eric Laroche, World Health Organization Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises. "A greater emphasis on reducing the risks posed by disasters will save more lives and reduce injuries, disease, disabilities and psychosocial impacts that result from them. Hospitals, for example, should not be victims of disasters."

According to a recent WMO survey, nearly 60% of some 140 participating countries require strengthening of their observing networks and infrastructure, technical and institutional capacities, and operational partnerships among their agencies, to establish effective early warning systems to warn the population against disasters, particularly in the most vulnerable territories.

“WMO’s 188 Members are attaching high priority to the integration of early warning systems into emergency management and response,” says the Organization’s Secretary-General Michel Jarraud. “The objective is, by 2019, to reduce by 50 per cent the associated 10-year average fatality of the period 1994-2003 for weather-, climate- and water-related disasters.”

Concludes Margareta Wahlström, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction: “Government leaders and their advisors will be leaving this conference with one very clear path to follow: invest in sound and sustainable DRR measures today to provide a safer tomorrow for existing and future generations. The alternative is to face some much harder decisions on climate change adaptation and vulnerability a few years hence, when any practical choices will be far more limited.”

Notes to Editors

1. 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.

2. The Global Platform is the main biennial forum on disaster risk reduction bringing together a wide cross-section of the world’s disaster risk reduction community, including heads of state, senior ministers, UN agencies, NGOs, scientific and technical experts, and others. The main highlights include:

- Opening Ceremony presided by John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, and Convener of the Global Platform and addressed by Keynote Speakers.
- Five High Level Panels exploring crucial issues that can make the world safer: Investment, Climate Change Adaptation, Community Resilience, Safer Hospitals and Schools, Building Back Better;
- Five Roundtables – Early Warning, NGOs, Local Authorities, Education, Ecosystems;
- Five Special Events – including the public launch of the Red Cross Red Crescent World Disasters Report, a BBC World Debate featuring some hard-hitting dialogue between disaster risk reduction specialists in front of a TV audience and a Film Debate highlighting climate change adaptation films;
- Some 40 side events organised by ISDR partners and a market-place featuring more than 30 booths/exhibits from ISDR partners.

3. Access: <http://www.preventionweb.net/globalplatform/2009/programme/> for full details of the Platform Program, Timetable and other available documentation.

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