



United Nations  
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## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Australia floods demonstrate rising cost of damage in the face of “new normal”**

Floods in Australia again underline the need for all countries – both developed and developing – to plan ahead or face increasing economic losses in the face of a “new normal” marked by unpredictable and extreme weather patterns, says UNISDR.

Torrential rains have left parts of northeastern Australia severely flooded, and several towns and villages in Queensland and New South Wales were declared disaster areas. In one town, a few hundred citizens had to be airlifted to safety by local authorities. The floods have destroyed crops ranging from wheat to cotton, and have affected operations in some of Queensland’s coal mines.

“Reports from Australia say flood damage may reach \$1 billion. With weather patterns becoming more unpredictable and extreme, costs of this magnitude may become commonplace in all parts of the world unless we urgently change the way we think about and react to disasters,” said Margareta Wahlström, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction.

“At the UN, our interest is to change the view that disasters are ‘natural’ and to cause people to accept that disasters are ‘man-made’ and must be planned for. With planning, it will be possible to lessen the blow when storms or other hazards hit,” she explained. “If we carry on treating disasters as events disconnected to our actions, nothing will change. And we remain vulnerable to ever more costly damage.”

Severe flooding is not a new occurrence in northeastern Australia. According to an Australian government website, over one million square kilometres of Queensland and New South Wales were flooded in April 1990, where around 2,000 homes were inundated in the worst affected towns.

Earlier still, in January 1974, a cyclone brought heavy rainfall to Brisbane and many parts of south-eastern Queensland and northern New South Wales, according to the same website. One third of Brisbane’s city centre and 17 suburbs were severely flooded. Fourteen people died and over 300 were injured. Fifty-six homes were washed away and 1,600 were submerged.

“The key to reducing the impact of disasters is to anticipate the consequences of our economic and social development, and to ensure that risk assessments become a routine part of planning,” stressed Ms. Wahlström. “Where are we exposing ourselves to unnecessary risk? In cases where risks are

known, what can governments and communities do to make society more resilient? And how can everyday citizens contribute to building resilience?”

Throughout 2010, as part of its “*Making Cities Resilient*” campaign, UNISDR has been encouraging local governments to perform risk assessments, to assign a budget for disaster risk reduction, to maintain critical infrastructure that reduces risk, and to ensure education and training in risk reduction.

In late November, Ms. Wahlström visited the Australian city of Cairns, in Queensland, which was the first to join the resilient cities campaign. Cairns was also the first in Queensland to have a purpose-built, category-5 cyclone rated Disaster Coordination Centre, which acts the hub for regional management in the case of disaster. The building will be used for disaster management coordination training and education for the wider community.

So far, 159 cities worldwide have joined the “*Making Cities Resilient*” campaign, and will share their experiences at the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction -- a gathering of disaster risk reduction practitioners to be hosted by UNISDR in Geneva, from 8-13 May 2011.

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