

Robert Watkins, UN Resident Coordinator
Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) National Conference & Official Meetings
Beirut, 17-18 October 2012

National Conference “Assessing and Managing Risks in Lebanon”
Grand Serail, 17 October 2012, 10H00

Opening Remarks

Your Excellency, Prime Minister Najib Mikati
Your Honorable Ministers,
Ms. Margareta Wahlstrom, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General
for Disaster Risk Reduction
Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this conference on “Assessing and Managing Risks in Lebanon”. This event provides us with an opportunity to share experiences and best practices with a number of countries, including Japan, the EU, Jordan, and Italy.

Disaster Risk Reduction has a multidimensional nature, as it concerns a number of different sectors. I am therefore particularly delighted to see the commitment of the Government of Lebanon and other stakeholders to ensure that Lebanon is adequately ready natural disasters. This conference has brought together experts, practitioners, and decision makers from a wide range of fields and disciplines. I would like to thank the Government of Lebanon, the local authorities, scientific and academic institutions, and international and local non-governmental organisations, but in particular the 257 mayors whose municipalities have joined the “Making Cities Resilient Campaign”, for their engagement towards the successful implementation of all DRR efforts.

Across the globe, major natural disasters impact the lives, livelihoods and well-being of millions of people. The devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the nuclear catastrophe following the tsunami in Fukushima/Japan last year, are among the most recent and dramatic examples. But many natural disasters go unnoticed, as do their effects. A recent World Bank/UN report estimates that

storms, floods, earthquakes and droughts caused more than 3.3 million deaths and US\$2.3 trillion in damage between 1970 and 2010.

Natural hazards affect rich and poor countries alike. Yet, low- and middle-income countries are generally less able to cope with the effects posed by natural disasters. For these countries, mitigating the risks before disaster strikes is essential.

As we know, Lebanon sits precariously on the boundary between the Arabian and the African continental plates, and is at high risk of earthquakes and tsunamis. Other natural hazards related to climate, such as forest fires and floods, also threaten the country and its population with increasing frequency. The effects of such disasters are first and foremost human: they are measured in deaths, injuries, displacement, and the loss of family livelihoods. But disasters can damage entire economies as well, by causing damage to infrastructure and to businesses. Between 1980 and 2010, losses to Lebanon's economy from natural disasters amounted to over \$ 1.5 billion.

Yet just because Lebanon is exposed to natural hazards, this does not mean that it must be vulnerable to them. Natural hazards can of course not be avoided, but measures can be taken to greatly reduce risks of mortality, suffering and economic loss, and to increase Lebanon's resilience over the longer term.

It is precisely with this objective in mind that the Prime Minister's Office and several Government Ministries have undertaken a number of efforts to strengthen the capacity of Lebanese institutions to better prepare for natural disasters across the different sectors.

In conclusion, as the global theme of this year is "Women and Girls: the (in)Visible force of resilience", I would like to underline the contribution of all Lebanese women to make their communities more resilient to disasters and climate risks. Lebanese women represent the majority of nurses and school teachers, so they can play a critical role in protecting the lives of children and adults alike. The UN is committed to these women and to their efforts.

In any country, effective disaster risk reduction can only be achieved through a close partnership with the Government, Civil Society, and the private sector. It

is in this spirit that the Prime Minister's Office, supported by the United Nations, has facilitated this important conference.

I wish you a fruitful meeting.

Shukran.