

PRESS RELEASE

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UN REPORT FINDS DISASTERS TAKING HEAVY TOLL ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA-PACIFIC

YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA, 23 October 2012 – A UN Report released today at the opening of the Fifth Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk reduction shows that Asia and the Pacific are paying a huge price for extreme weather events which are now impacting negatively on the continent's economic development.

Increasing disaster risks in Asia-Pacific are driven by the twin challenge of increasing exposure of its people and economic assets, and the inability of the most vulnerable groups to cope with disasters, according to the latest assessment of disasters in the region published by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR).

For many in Asia and the Pacific, 2011 will be remembered for major disasters with devastating impacts on economies, communities and above all the lives of people across the region. The Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and the ensuing nuclear disaster, as well as the Southeast Asian floods, were major contributors to the staggering \$294 billion in regional economic losses – representing 80 per cent of global losses due to disasters in 2011.

“Our shared challenge in Asia and the Pacific is to control both the growing rate of exposure and rising vulnerability. Exposure to hazards has multiplied as urban centres grow and people and economic activities expand into increasingly exposed and hazard-prone land. It is also a concern that smaller economies, those that have less diversified economic structures, and countries with high fiscal deficits, show greater strains of vulnerability even when faced with relatively small-scale disasters,” said Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

The ESCAP/UNISDR Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2012, *‘Reducing Vulnerability and Exposure to Disasters’* finds that from 1970 to 2010 the average number of people exposed to yearly flooding in Asia has more than doubled from 29.5 million to 63.8 million and the population resident in cyclone-prone areas has grown from 71.8 million to 120.7 million.

Margareta Wahlström, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction, said: “Exposure to disaster risk is growing faster than our ability to build resilience and Asia's rapid economic growth is partly responsible for it. This was very obvious during the floods which plagued much of the region last year. Of course, the challenge is not to stop development, but to arrest both the growing rate of exposure and rising vulnerability. Reducing risk successfully is about saving lives, jobs, homes and valuable infrastructure such as schools, health facilities and roads.”

The report finds that it is small farmers, micro enterprises and poor households that bear the brunt of the costs of disasters in many developing countries. Additionally, it shows that the cumulative impact of small-scale disaster events can be just as detrimental, or more so, than a large event in some countries. Mortality and property losses are increasing in countries such as Lao PDR, Indonesia, Iran and Nepal due to small- and medium-scale disasters.

One of the most positive developments, however, is that, despite greater frequency of these events and increased damage to property and livelihoods, the death toll from such disasters as typhoons, floods and landslides in some subregions is decreasing. This is a significant accomplishment, and proves that better disaster risk management - investing in early warning systems, preparedness and social safety nets - saves lives. However, people need to demand greater accountability for reducing their exposure to hazards in the first place through better urban planning and other preventive measures which build disaster resilience. Economic development creates resilience when invested to reduce the vulnerability of people and communities, says the report.

As a good practice, the report highlights Joey Sarte Salceda, Governor of Albay province in the Philippines, who adopted a very pragmatic approach to reduce disaster risk exposure first and improving vulnerabilities next. Unfortunately, such proactive policies are still the exception, according to the report, and not the rule in the region. The report also indicates that some outstanding efforts have been made to reverse these trends. Bangladesh's investments of more than \$10 billion in the past 35 years in flood and coastal management have resulted in lower disaster losses. Again, it is one of only a handful of countries in the region to have done so.

Countries are increasingly embracing the view that minimizing disaster risk is essential for achieving sustainable development and many have started to take action to build the resilience of people and communities, but more needs to be done to protect various population segments that are vulnerable to disasters, such as women and children, people with disabilities and the aged as very little concerted effort has been made to deal with these populations that are highly vulnerable to disasters.

The report says that land use planning, supply chain management and targeted social safety nets for the most vulnerable have the potential to reduce disaster risks significantly. The report further shows how regional cooperation can be used for cost effective sharing of highly sophisticated and sometimes costly ICT and space technologies.

In closing, the report calls on governments to focus on development strategies that reduce exposure to hazards and to invest more in disaster risk reduction policies to achieve greater resilience against disasters.

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About UNISDR: UNISDR is the UN office dedicated to disaster risk reduction. It is led by the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction and supports implementation of the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters* which seeks "the substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries."

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