



UN World Conference on
Disaster Risk Reduction

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Ministerial Round Tables (AM & PM)

INVOLVEMENT AT LOCAL LEVEL CRITICAL TO REDUCING DISASTER RISK,

SPEAKERS SAY AS SENDAI WORLD CONFERENCE CONTINUES

Speakers in Sendai today called for a paradigm shift to avert the calamitous effects of disasters from a top-down approach to a bottom-up approach that drew on contributions from local leaders and communities, districts and villages, during a discussion titled "Governing Disaster Risk: Overcoming Challenges".

Seeking to recast the narrative for disaster risk reduction, ministers and other senior officials in the third round table of the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction weighed the advantages of proactive local ownership to reduce the impacts and prevent the devastating and cascading effects of such natural hazards even amid the challenges of a landscape marked by varying levels of vulnerability and capacity, and differing cultural and political views.

Full engagement locally and a clear articulation of responsibilities was a message conveyed by many, including Japan's State Minister of the Cabinet Office, who said that public awareness was the first line of defence; involving the entire country, society and all communities was the second.

It was up to each individual to save him- or herself, he said, and for the national Government to make every effort to assist them. Japan had spent a significant amount of money to create a sea wall and a disaster prevention map, but it was nevertheless crucial for everyone to run for their lives, for unless they did, they would not be able to save themselves.

Asserting that the issue had become more complex in Indonesia was its Minister for Disaster Management, who said that as his country contained more than 300 ethnic groups, centralization was not easy. The Government sought to engage local governments in disaster risk reduction, of the view that collaboration was vital between neighbouring districts and cities in the same province. Their knowledge was the "local wisdom", he said.

Several high-level representatives from Africa described a portfolio of ruinous disasters, from earthquakes, landslides and droughts to severe flooding and tropical cyclones. The Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees of Uganda said his country was putting in place institutional structures, with clear mandates involving national and community levels.

The Assistant Minister for Presidential Affairs and Public Administration of Botswana highlighted local-level initiatives and projects identified by villages and communities, for which indigenous and traditional knowledge played a part. As a result of interventions that targeted vulnerable groups, Botswana reported zero deaths associated with droughts.

A "disaster-resilient Ethiopia" was the aim of that Government, said its State Minister for Agriculture. The matter topped the country's development

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agenda, as did putting in place a legal framework built from the grassroots level up.

Boasting implementation of a 2006 action programme was the Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, who said that, at present, regional and subregional platforms were in play, and of the 54 countries in Africa, 38 had national platforms and some had working committees cascading down to the grassroots level. Policies and strategies had been put in place, and the Union continued to work with countries to ensure disaster risk reduction issues were not "left behind".

At round table IV this afternoon, titled "Reducing Disaster Risk in Urban Settings", participants explored ways to align urban agendas with disaster risk reduction as well as with sustainable development efforts, climate change mitigation and humanitarian improvement.

The round table tomorrow, 17 March, will focus on public investment strategies for disaster risk reduction and is set to begin at 3 p.m., as negotiations continue on the post-2015 framework.

Ministerial Round Table III

The ministerial round table this morning, chaired by María del Pilar Cornejo, Minister of the Secretariat of Risk Management of Ecuador, and held in parallel with the plenary meetings, was titled "Governing Disaster Risk: Overcoming Challenges". It was intended to identify pragmatic ways and means to address gaps in governance that affect disaster risk management at the national and local level, and to drive the implementation of the post-2015 framework, in the wake of the Hyogo Framework for Action.

In introductory remarks, the Chair acknowledged progress over the past 10 years in implementing the Hyogo Framework; 120 countries had modified their policies and legal framework, and more than 190 had designated focal points, while 85 had established national platforms for disaster risk reduction. But gaps remained at the national level, and owing to the multidimensional nature of the risk, arrangements could no longer be perceived as "stand-alone" schemes or separate from the governance context, the great challenge of which was to eliminate all forms of discrimination. She outlined questions to be addressed in the morning's meeting, including what steps should be taken to induce public and private investment, as well as how Governments could spur the active and inclusive participation of local partners and community leaders in implementing national strategies.

As speakers took the floor, hailing from a diverse cross-section of countries, communities and regions, no one was under any illusion that the way forward would be easy. Many expressed awareness that human suffering from natural disasters had multiplied in recent years owing to increased frequency and intensity, making it imperative to minimize vulnerability and build resilience. Also seen as critical was strengthening local governance by instilling those leaders with the confidence, resources and power to be effective contributors to mitigating the problems.

Ryosei Akazawa, State Minister of the Cabinet Office of Japan, discussed the historical significance of the great east Japan earthquake, in which 16,000 people had died, with several thousand still missing. Experiences were learned from that event, yet despite the fact that 20 per cent of earthquakes registering a magnitude of 8.0 and above occurred in Japan, his country's citizens had "forgotten about them"; they needed to be reminded "it could happen to us", he said. It was up to each and every individual to save him- or herself and for the national Government to make every effort to assist them. Japan had spent much money to create a sea wall and a disaster prevention map, but it was

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nevertheless crucial for everyone to run for their lives, for unless they did, they would not be able to save themselves.

At the same time, he acknowledged that investment in disaster risk reduction would make it possible to ensure an appropriate response. Public awareness was the first line of defence; the second was the need to involve the entire country and society, and all communities. Also critical was the combination of structural and non-structural measures. Evacuation drills would be conducted in his country in order to "refresh memories". A new law had been established and 45 worst-case scenarios had been elaborated. Disaster risk reduction was an issue of policy and should not be politicized, he said, urging that risks be communicated to the public, which, in turn, must be motivated to combat them through the help of plans and preparations.

The issues being discussed had become more critical and more complex in Indonesia, said that country's Minister for Disaster Management, Syamsul Maarif, especially owing to the existence of more than 300 ethnic groups with diverse cultures and traditions. It was not easy to centralize such a society. In that light, the Government had aimed to decentralize its response and engage local governments, of the view that collaboration was vital between neighbouring districts and cities in the same province. Their knowledge was the "local wisdom".

Turning participants' attention to the problem of sea-level rise was Aaron Cook, Minister for Commerce, Industry and Environment of Nauru. He confirmed that that phenomenon exacerbated climate change impacts and was causing, among other things, infusions of saltwater into freshwater and irrigation systems. Plus, the small phosphate rock island nation experienced droughts lasting as long as 36 months; prolonged, those severely stressed the natural ecosystem. Nauru wished to govern disaster risk, but it required considerable assistance to do so.

Senior Government officials from a range of countries in Africa described a portfolio of devastating disasters, from earthquakes, landslides and droughts to severe flooding and tropical cyclones, noting efforts under way to engage local governments in managing the hazards. Hillary Onek, Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees of Uganda, said his country was putting in place institutional structures with clear mandates involving national and community levels. Local governments worked directly as partners, and district management committees brought together various institutions in the process. A national platform met monthly to discuss the matter, and institutional structures and a national policy were in place. A bill was currently being drafted on a national disaster law, he said.

Drawing attention to the challenges was James Agalga, Deputy Minister for the Interior of Ghana, who pointed in particular to a weak political commitment to legislation to offset the disasters. Commitment was also lacking among subregional bodies, and there was a reluctance by Governments to release funds for risk reduction. When it came to risk response, however, they were more prepared to step up. Strategically, laws should be enacted to give legal "teeth" to risk reduction, and Ghana was reviewing one to reflect the current risks and the measures required to deal with them.

"Enormous disasters in a country with limited resources" characterized the problems facing Botswana, said that country's Assistant Minister for Presidential Affairs and Public Administration, Dikgang Phillip Makgalemele. He described the national vision and bodies established for its realization, noting broad support for guaranteeing equality for all. Like previous speakers, he highlighted local-level initiatives and projects identified by villages and communities, for which indigenous and traditional knowledge played a part. As a result of interventions that targeted vulnerable groups, Botswana reported zero

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deaths associated with droughts. But regular flash floods affected the vulnerable, destroying their houses and stripping them of human dignity. To offset that, the Government had spent \$4 million in one year alone to restore those properties. It was also committed to eliminating abject poverty by the end of March 2017. Still, constraints persisted and competing development needs and uncoordinated disaster risk reduction and climate change mechanisms only added to the difficulties.

Mahmoud Issa, Director-General of Civil Defence of the State of Palestine, drew attention to the establishment of a national team to combat floods and climate effects. Palestine was now putting in place a wide-ranging bill, and hopefully there would soon be a disaster risk reduction law and national strategy. Collaboration across the board between private and public sectors characterized the response to disasters. However, there were also "unnatural disasters" in Palestine, owing to the Israeli occupation. He pointed to the isolation wall, settlement construction, and control of land, resources and properties. A "rupture" between Palestine and Gaza would increase an already difficult situation, the speaker said.

A "disaster-resilient Ethiopia" was the aim of that Government, said its State Minister for Agriculture, Mitiku Kassa Gutile. Minimizing disaster impacts was a priority, while in turn preventing risk contributed to social and economic development. Indeed, the matter topped the country's development agenda, as did putting in place a legal framework built from the grassroots level up. The Government had also developed a climate resilience green strategy. More broadly, it was focused on managing disaster risk rather than managing the resulting emergencies. Another building block of that new approach was a strategic programme and an investment framework; with partners' support, Ethiopia sought to provide guidance and ensure harmonization among all concerned bodies.

On prevention, said Joseph Chennoth, Apostolic Nuncio of the Holy See in Japan, a "living solidarity" must prevail at the local, national and international levels. Catastrophes affected the most vulnerable disproportionately and, in addition to taking lives, those calamities destabilized already fragile economies. With regard to the post-2015 action plan, he sought a long-term blueprint with resilience as the main objective, bearing in mind the family's crucial role. Reconstruction was a question of hope, without which rebuilding would not begin. Additionally, the capacity of self-organization within local communities should never be underestimated, and help from the "outside" should be avoided. The outcome document should mention not only indigenous cultures, but other cultures and religious traditions as well.

Boasting implementation of a 2006 action programme was Rhoda Peace Tumusiime, Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture of the African Union. At present, regional and subregional platforms were in play, and of the 54 countries in Africa, 38 had national platforms and some already had working committees cascading down to the grassroots level. There was increased political will and appreciation for disaster risk reduction, and most of the offices dealing with that were housed either in the President's or Prime Minister's office. Policies and strategies had been put in place, and the Union continued to work with countries to ensure disaster risk reduction issues were not "left behind".

Other participants in the high-level discussion were representatives of Luxembourg, Madagascar, Mauritius, United Arab Emirates, Spain, Mongolia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Tajikistan, Sudan, United Kingdom, Philippines, United States, Fiji, Timor-Leste, and Turkey.

Also speaking were representatives of New Caledonia, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), South Asian Civil Society Network, United Nations Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Ministerial Round Table IV

The afternoon round table, entitled "Reducing Disaster Risk in Urban Settings", was moderated by Pravin Jamnadas Gordhan, Minister for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs of South Africa.

Recognizing that that storm surges, heat stress, flooding and water scarcity were a major threat to the population and complex infrastructure of cities, participants discussed aligning urban agendas with disaster risk reduction as well as with efforts for sustainable development, climate change mitigation and humanitarian improvement.

Opening the session, Mr. Gordhan stressed the magnitude of the challenges of urbanization, noting that cities were set to have 6.3 billion inhabitants by 2050, or two thirds of the world's population. The rapid rise would take place, he said, mainly in developing countries, most quickly in Africa and Asia. Built environments that were poorly planned and managed increased risks in areas exposed to natural hazards. Climate change exacerbated those risks. Slums and the poor people in them were most vulnerable, he emphasized.

However, with 60 per cent of the urban environment of 2030 yet to be built, cities also represented unparalleled opportunity to avoid past mistakes and embed resilience in policies and planning, he added, while noting that this must be done within financial constraints. "Reinforcing commitments to a new, enhanced disaster risk reduction agenda presents a strategic opportunity. Let us make the most of this opportunity," he urged.

In the discussion that followed, speakers stressed that clear priorities and best practices were needed immediately to guide planning because of the rapid growth of cities. The Director of the Expert Board of the China National Commission of Disaster Reduction, Qin Dahe, said that his country alone would have an urban population exceeding 1 billion by 2030.

The Executive Director of UN-Habitat, Joan Clos, emphasized how revolutionary such rapid growth was in the course of human history and how much pressure it could place on those charged with disaster risk reduction. The Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), William Swing, said that disasters in both rural and urban areas exacerbated city growth because the resulting migrants often moved to cities.

In that vein, the Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees of Uganda, Hillary Onek, pointed out that city growth often ran far ahead of planning, usually in the poor neighbourhoods that attracted people looking for livelihood opportunities. His country was trying to decentralize opportunities throughout it so that cities did not grow as quickly as predicted.

Similarly, the Ambassador of Peru to Japan, Elard Escala, described programmes to spread services throughout his country along with better regulation of land use for the purpose of slowing concentrations of the urban population. Within cities, it was important to reduce the number of those concentrated near important infrastructure by more fairly distributing facilities, the National Coordinator for Disaster Risk Reduction of Ghana, Ebenezer Kofi Ofori Portuphy, said. The Minister of Interior and Decentralization of Madagascar, Solonandrasana Olivier Mahafaly, spoke of the

importance of a master plan for land management to help shape rapid growth and keep population from growing in high risk areas such as flood zones.

When rapid growth occurred in peri-urban areas, it was vital to keep track of the changes there in order to manage disaster risk, some speakers stressed. The Minister for Urban Renewal and Informal Settlements of Egypt, Laila Iskandar, described her country's focus on poor neighbourhoods through extensive monitoring and awareness promotion through non-governmental organizations. Mr. Clos of UN-Habitat also underlined the need for constant communication about urban disaster risks with the populations of all urban neighbourhoods.

The importance of communication was also underlined by the Governor of Hyogo Prefecture of Japan, Toshizo Ido, who emphasized the need to relate the experience of disasters such as the one that resulted from his region's earthquakes as part of a multigenerational culture of cities. While recovering and reducing risk, it was critical not to forget so that people were ready to face the challenges of future events.

Some speakers prioritized regional risk reduction to meet the special needs of cities. The Minister of Government of Panama, Milton Cohen-Henriquez, said that his country had established regional relief centres to address the consequences of disasters in Central America. His country, he said, was an ideal location to stock relief supplies and monitoring equipment. Elisabetta Gardini, Member of the European Parliament, said it was essential for regional organizations to give local authorities the tools they needed to manage risk.

Regional preparation for urban flooding was critical for cities in his country, the Minister of Government of Niger, Abdoul Kader Agali, said. Niger's integrated plan for annual flood management included data collection and relief, he added. Brazil's Minister for National Integration, Gilberto Magalhães Occhi, said his country had set up extensive regional precipitation monitoring in order to prepare cities for possible floods. The Director of the District Unit for Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change of Colombia, Javier Pava, also described regional strategies for water management for risk prevention and sustainability.

While regional mobilization was important, disaster risk management in cities required the leadership and empowerment of local authorities, most speakers stressed. Thomas Silberhorn, Deputy Minister and Parliamentary State Secretary of Germany, said that his country focused on empowerment of citizens in its resilience cooperation programmes. The Minister for Environment of Poland, Maciej Grabowski, added that it was important to build trust at the local level for the success of land-use planning schemes. Such local organizations as fire brigades should be consulted on risk reduction strategies, he added.

While noting the importance of action at the local level, participants also emphasized the importance of guidance, support and coordination from the national level. In that vein, Mr. Clos of UN-Habitat emphasized the need for authorities at all levels to have clear responsibility. The Secretary of State in the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Romania, Raed Arafat, said that it was critical that localities not be left on their own to manage risk; a national system was crucial.

So that best practices could be developed at both the national and local level simultaneously, the Minister for Internal Administration of Portugal, Anabela Rodrigues, said that her country prioritized information-sharing between all levels of administration. The State Minister for Agriculture of Ethiopia, Mitiku Kassa Gutile, said that his country had established a lead agency to oversee disaster risk reduction in cities; the same framework encompassed all urban settings in the country. The Head of the National Civil Protection

Department of Italy, Franco Gabrielli, described a national-supported but locally-empowered urban risk reduction regime in his country.

Specific urban hazards were the focus of some speakers. The Minister for Interior and Public Safety of Senegal, Abdoulaye Daouda Diallo, said his country was drawing up contingency plans for industrial accidents and quick-spreading biological threats. Others, such as the Minister for Disaster Management, Syamsul Maarif, prioritized protection of specific urban infrastructure such as hospitals and schools.

Speaking from the point of view of cooperation in urban risk reduction, the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Netherlands, Elisabeth Ploumen, said that nature had forced her country to stay ahead of natural hazards for centuries through innovative design. It was important to come up with bold ideas for cities throughout the world. She pledged her country's continued efforts to help develop such solutions. The Senior Director of Social, Urban, Rural and Global Resilience for the World Bank Group, Ede Ijjasz-Vasquez, said that all development cooperation projects in urban areas should be vetted for disaster risk, as projects supported by the World Bank were.

Also speaking on strategies for urban risk reduction were ministers and other officials from Trinidad and Tobago, Gambia, Guatemala, Zambia, Canada, Columbia, Norway, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Ecuador, and Nepal, as well as officials from the City of Aqaba, Jordan, and the University of Brasilia.

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