



PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PRESS RELEASE – BAM EARTHQUAKE

Can we avoid another Bam tragedy in the future?

United Nations International Strategy for Disaster
Reduction Inter-Agency Secretariat (ISDR)

On 26 December 2003 an earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale destroyed the historic city of Bam, Iran, killing, according to the latest figures over 30'000 people.

The international community has responded generously to the needs of the population and the welcome solidarity and support will go a long way in restoring the dignity of the survivors and rebuilding the cultural heritage. However, to avoid similar tragedies in the future, a fundamental shift in the international approach to disasters is necessary.

As Charles Richter, developer of the earthquake Richter scale, once famously said, "Earthquakes don't kill people, collapsing buildings do". Bam tragedy underlines the urgent need to reduce the risk of disasters for millions. Jan Egeland, United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, upon his return from Iran where he visited Bam and met with Iranian authorities in Teheran said: "*We cannot start to comprehend the extent of the tragedy, even when we go to Bam to see it with ones own eyes. I've never seen such a total devastation occur in a concentrated area over such a short time period.*"

When addressing the issue of disaster risks, and in particular those of earthquakes, even though it is often understood what actions are required, seldom are sufficient efforts taken on the ground to implement them. This certainly seems to be the case of the earthquake in Bam.

In 1991, 1995, 1999 and 2003, four International Conferences on Seismology and Earthquake Engineering were held in Tehran, with each one attended by more than 1000 participants from over 25 countries.



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More papers and studies are not the solution, although it is important to note the quality of expertise and the level of professional acknowledgement regarding seismic risk present in Iran. What becomes less evident is the demonstration *in practice* of the knowledge that exists within technical institutions and among specialists and perhaps official authorities.

Many large cities around the world are at risk of earthquakes, with the great majority of them in developing countries. Salvano Briceño, Director of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) Secretariat in Geneva, notes, *“For the future, the reduction of vulnerability to earthquakes is clearly an urgent goal. Human efforts and political will together can reduce the impact of these future risks to many societies. One cannot afford to be complacent. International resources dedicated to this purpose and to support countries are still very insufficient – especially when measured against the magnitude of repeated losses.”*

It is precisely the role of the United Nations, through the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), a partnership between governments, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, funding institutions, the scientific community as well as other relevant stakeholders in the disaster reduction community, to promote the implementation of disaster risk reduction. This is proving to be an uphill struggle.

In a society with many competing demands on resources, earthquake risk reduction efforts are seldom seen as an immediate priority, nor particularly an investment that provides a quick return.

The perceptions that the cost to build earthquake-resistant buildings or upgrade existing infrastructure is very high are false -- once the true costs are compared to picking up the pieces and rebuilding after a disaster occurs.

Governments and local authorities have an important responsibility to act together to design plans and to take action to reduce the risks through the application of available knowledge. The Secretariat of the ISDR will therefore continue to support the efforts of the international community in this important global enterprise.

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