

PRESS RELEASE

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African solidarity strengthens disaster risk reduction

Policy makers are set to agree on a continental programme of action to implement the Africa Regional Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction – a programme that will protect lives and livelihoods from the risks of natural hazards. The first African Union Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction is taking place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 5-7 December 2005.

According to the Africa Regional Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction, disaster risk reduction policies do exist in some African countries, but their effect has been limited by the lack of a comprehensive strategy. "This continental programme has been developed with the understanding that natural hazards respect no boundaries, and that protection requires a coordinated and regional approach," says Mr. Salvano Briceño, Director of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Secretariat (ISDR).

This programme of action was drafted in response to the call made by the Head of States and Government at its African Union Summit in July 2004 in Addis Ababa. This conference is organized to finalize the programme of action with the participation of experts and Ministers at a crucial time as the continent is still reeling from the impacts of recent and on-going disasters, such as the Karthala Volcano eruption in Comoros, drought in Southern Africa and Niger, and locust invasions in the Sahel and West Africa. According to the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, since 2000, over 20 million Africans were directly affected by disasters every year. The timing is also significant as we approach the anniversary of the 26 December Indian Ocean Tsunami that affected several African countries.

The African continent has traditionally been affected by many natural hazards, such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, volcanoes and tropical storms.

More and more people are affected by these hazards and economic losses are rising. "If given the right support, this programme promises to put the continent on the right path to reverse this trend", explains Mr. Briceño, "Africa is leading the way on disaster risk reduction, and on implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action, which was adopted by 168 countries in Kobe, Japan, earlier this year."

Large-scale poverty and widespread of HIV/AIDS, coupled with increased urban migration and environmental degradation, leave many people in Africa extremely vulnerable to natural hazards. During the 2004 locust invasions in West Africa, for example, millions of hectares of crops and pasture were destroyed, exacting a tremendous economic toll on countries affected.

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This underlines that disasters can derail socio-economic development Disaster risk reduction is critical for Africa to achieve poverty eradication. Disasters caused by vulnerability to natural hazards are increasingly becoming an impediment to sustainable development in Africa. It is thus clear that disaster risk reduction must be mainstreamed as an integral component of sustainable development in the continent.

The Conference will bring together approximately 20 Ministers and 25 Ambassadors and over 50 senior Government officials and experts representing over 40 countries, to discuss and agree on areas of priorities to implement the Africa Regional Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction under the guidance of the Hyogo Framework for Action.

The African Union Commission is organizing this first Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction at the African Union Commission Conference Centre. This Conference builds on important work to address disaster risk reduction in Africa, led by the African Union Commission and the NEPAD in collaboration with the African Development Bank, with the support of the UN/ISDR Africa office and other UN Agencies.

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