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PRESS RELEASE

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First Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction “Our vulnerability to disasters has never been so high”, says USG for Humanitarian Affairs

GENEVA. Over 120 governments meet today in Geneva to launch the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, a gathering that is expected to become the major international consultative forum on disaster reduction.

Chaired by Mr. John Holmes, the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, this new body brings together governments, UN and other specialized organizations, financial and academic institutions, NGOs and other members of the civil society for a three-day discussion to address the new challenges posed by climate change and urban risks on vulnerable populations.

This week’s meeting in Geneva will agree on a broad work plan for the next few years, involving all key actors in disaster risk reduction, from governments to local communities

“Our vulnerability to disasters has never been so high. For the first time ever, the world’s urban population will exceed its rural population and one third of the urban population will live in marginal settlements or in slums. Growing urbanization combined with climate change will create new stresses on urban settlements, making millions of people even more vulnerable to disasters”, says John Holmes. “We have no choice. We need to move the disaster risk reduction agenda forward if we want to save lives.”

Eight out of the ten most populated cities in the world are prone to earthquakes and six of them are vulnerable to storm surges, floods and tsunami waves. The recent reports made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predict more weather related disasters in the future with over 200 million people facing the risk of coastal flooding in crowded cities like Cairo, Dhaka, Mumbai, New York and London.

The first session of the Global Platform will review the progress made in disaster risk reduction policies and implementation since the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction adopted the Hyogo Framework for Action in Kobe, Japan in January 2005. The ten year plan was adopted by governments only weeks after the devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean, to increase the resilience of nations and communities to disasters.

“We certainly need to continue reducing carbon emissions but as global warming is already here, we need at the same time to find other ways to reduce the impacts of climate change. The Hyogo Framework is a tool to make people more resilient to disasters: that is part of the solution” says Salvano Briceño, Director of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction secretariat. “Good governance, effective planning, courageous budgeting, and implementing policies to prevent human settlement in hazardous areas are indispensable; we have to ensure that hospitals, schools, transportation and water systems are hazard resilient.”

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) which is celebrating today the World Environment Day is also calling for more action. “By joining forces, the climate change and disaster reduction communities can assist in boosting investments towards vulnerable countries and communities. Together we can also help convince decision-makers that adaptation and prevention must be given greater priority” said UNEP Executive Director, Achim Steiner.

The impact of climate change will be further discussed at the G8 Summit in Germany tomorrow, where the United Nations Secretary General will encourage increasing synergy between disaster risk reduction and climate change agendas.