



United Nations
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Early warning systems do save lives

As hurricane Dean is heading toward Belize and the east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, the ISDR secretariat recalls that early warnings systems are the most efficient systems to save lives against disasters and need to be further implemented at local levels.

“Early warnings systems allow populations to evacuate ahead of time and take shelter in emergency and safer buildings. They give governments enough time to protect critical infrastructures such as power plants and water tanks which can create further disasters if they are not protected” says Salvano Briceño, Director of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction in Geneva.

In Mexico, thousands of tourists have been alerted in advance to evacuate the coastal area of the Yucatan peninsula and hundred of workers have been removed from oil rigs in the Gulf to safer places. In Jamaica, the national electricity has been turned off and shelters had been organized all over the country. Schools and churches had also been converted into refuge shelters in Haiti. “Communities are much better prepared than during hurricanes Ivan or Wilma which hit the same region. People are learning from past experiences and are evacuating in time. The fear of being looted is still a huge trauma that needs to be better addressed in community based risk reduction programmes organized by local communities” says Salvano Briceño.

Early warning systems are available for almost all types of hazards, although warnings are much shorter for earthquakes. Earthquake experts are currently working on developing early warning systems based on one or two minutes time before an earthquake strikes. These two minutes will allow enough time to cut the electricity power which often triggers fires.

“In the case of earthquakes, what is essential is that construction codes need to be enforced, in which communities need to be involved as well. Awareness raising at the community level is a top priority of risk reduction strategies”, says Salvano Briceño.

Earthquakes such as the ones in Peru cannot be prevented but their impact can be reduced by improving the structural resilience of key facilities such as houses, schools and hospitals and educating people on how to protect cities and villages against earthquake threats.

The ISDR recommends adopting the Hyogo Framework for Action to make nations and communities more resilient to disasters. The framework was adopted in Japan in January 2005 by 168 governments and is to be implemented by 2015.