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PRESS RELEASE

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China's freak snowstorms: 'the new normal'?

The unprecedented scale, cost, and human impacts of China's freak month of snowstorms, its worst in 50 years, herald a need for the world to get ready for "new kinds of disasters," according to Sálvamo Briceño, Director of the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR). "So-called 'freak weather' is becoming more common," says Briceño, "and reducing vulnerability to these unexpected extremes must be a top priority for governments."

Among the 19 provinces affected by the three weeks of storms, were the badly-hit southern Chinese provinces of Hunan and Guizhou, more famed for their chilli peppers and subtropical climate than for heavy snow. The weather's unexpected intensity exceeded the capacity of these temperate regions' usual preparedness plans. It is estimated that over 100 million people throughout China have been directly affected by the weather, such as through loss of power and water – equivalent to at least the population of the United Kingdom and South Africa combined. More than 1.7 million people have been evacuated. The Chinese government has estimated the direct costs alone at \$7.5 billion.

The UN/ISDR secretariat emphasized the growing importance of ensuring infrastructure can withstand weather that was previously unthinkable. When billions of dollars in potential losses are balanced against the low costs of prevention in the future, the choice should be clear.

The China Meteorological Administration (CMA) is now warning that China must be prepared for more weather extremes due to climate change. In agreement, Mr Briceño notes that "the intensifying effect of climate change on weather, combined with global trends of rapid urbanization and environmental degradation, will lead to ever more complex disasters involving more and more people, and particularly affecting the poor. The impact of these storms on China's vast, mobile population, are a lesson in how we need to reduce the risks associated with extreme weather that most countries can expect in the future."

China's situation demonstrates that disaster risk reduction is not just a civil defence issue. China's snow disaster cut across all sectors – power and water lifelines, communications, air, land and sea transport, agriculture, and the financial markets – showing that reducing disaster risk is everyone's business, and must be a central development concern of national and local governments.

Briceño praised the Chinese government's rapid activation of emergency plans and marshalling of state resources to respond to the needs of over 100 million of its citizens, saying that "Governments across the world can learn from the Chinese government's commitment. Governments should also learn from the shock of new types of disasters, and need to start examining how to best adapt to unpredictable, 'freak' conditions that may sadly become all too normal."