

Remarks by Ambassador Albert Ramdin,
Assistant Secretary General of the OAS
2nd Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Reduction
United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)
Global Platform for the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA)

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Global and Regional Perspectives session – Official Statements Segment
room 1
16:30-18:30 hrs

Mr John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator,

Madam Margareta Wahlstrom, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction,

Heads of National Delegations and Inter-governmental Organizations,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honor and privilege to address this Second Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Reduction. This meeting is timely, as it occurs at the beginning of the hurricane and rainy seasons in the Caribbean and Central America, and a few days following the XXXIX session of the General Assembly of the OAS, in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Despite the high-level political debate that marked this meeting, the issue of disaster reduction occupied a relevant place in the agenda, and a resolution was approved in this regard to further elevate its importance in the Americas.

Disaster reduction, as we all know, is critical to the socio-economic development of our nations and the well-being of their peoples. And concurrently, risk drivers such as rapid unplanned urbanization, poor governance, vulnerable rural livelihoods and declining ecosystems have found a safe haven in unsustainable and socially inequitable development processes.

In the Americas, the inherent economic vulnerability of small states such as those in the wider Caribbean and Central America, as well as of small communities across the whole Western Hemisphere, results in a high exposure of these societies to the externally generated financial and economic shocks that have been felt across the globe over the past 18 months. It is a fact that these events have rendered these peoples more vulnerable and less able to prepare for, to cope with or to recover from future disaster events.

This year's hurricane and rainy seasons have just started for the Caribbean and Central American regions, and already we have seen the devastating impacts of intense rainfall, even as we brace for more extreme weather brought by tropical storms and hurricanes. In South America, just this past May, floods and mudslides from months of heavy rains in northern Brazil have displaced nearly 200,000 people; killed at least 19 and cut off shipments from a huge Amazon iron mine, impacting the economy of the whole region. In the northeastern state of Piauí a dam broke open, releasing a wall of water that destroyed 500 homes, killed four people and left an estimated 2,500 people homeless.

In Costa Rica, on January 8th, a 6.2 magnitude earthquake killed 23 people, injured 100, displaced more than 100,000 people in 71 communities and destroyed 423 houses. In Honduras, on May 28th, while we were preparing for the XXXIX session of the General Assembly, a 7.3 magnitude earthquake killed seven people and, likewise the earthquake in Costa Rica, caused about 100 million US Dollars in damage. While it is estimated that the relatively small impact is due to low population density, some experts also wonder whether this is not the result of cumulative impacts of disasters, as 1998 Hurricane Mitch could have displaced many people from that region.

All these events leave us in little doubt that disasters are anything but natural; that risk is an integral component of development, which can only be reduced by investing in vulnerability reduction and disaster mitigation; and through sound governance that ensures participation of all government and civil society. More evident is the need to integrate those most vulnerable communities into national economies and national development plans as productive agents, rather than social and economic burdens. In the Americas, they are those living in border areas, far from the capitals and even farther away from national development plans; as well as are those indigenous people, who have been isolated, culturally, socially and economically from national economies.

The loss of human life and community livelihood resulting from unpredictable natural phenomena points to the urgent need to develop policies, strategies, and procedures, at the national and regional levels, that will aid in the prevention and mitigation of the consequences of natural disasters. Likewise, infrastructure that takes years and invaluable resources to build and is then destroyed in a flash by forces of nature calls for stronger alliances and partnerships in order to rebuild and stabilize countries as quickly as possible in the aftermath of such disasters.

It is important to highlight that the Americas has succeeded in establishing some key mechanisms and instruments to confront disasters.

The Inter-American Strategic Plan for Policy on Vulnerability Reduction, Risk Management and Disaster Response represents a milestone in the Americas and a benchmark for the OAS. It is a departure from a focus on humanitarian assistance to integrated, multilateral cooperation in addressing the underlying causes of natural disasters, which are highlighted in the Priority Action 4 of the Hyogo Framework for Action, which is familiar to us.

The Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction, established in 1999, through the OAS General Assembly resolution AG/Res.1682, provides for a hemispheric forum on which the Regional Platform for Disaster Reduction in the Americas can be institutionalized, as it includes all Inter-American Sister Organizations, all relevant Regional Intergovernmental Organizations, namely SICA, CARICOM, ACS, and CAN, and all relevant UN System agencies. Development banks, International Financial Institutions, and multi-lateral and bilateral cooperation agencies, along with universities and other academic institutions, complete the Regional Platform in the Americas.

The OAS and Regional Inter-governmental Organizations consider the UNISDR and the Regional Platform, as the annual reporting mechanism for Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) and IASP implementation; and jointly support the implementation of intersectoral National Platforms. We, at OAS, believe that the central purpose of the Americas Regional Platform is to link global efforts with regional initiatives through a clear and strong articulation.

We further understand the need to harmonize the existing governance and institutional arrangements for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

Although the Inter-American system favors a collective approach, it works also on the basis of division of labor according to the expertise and mandates of each participating institution.

We understand that operations on the ground are the primary responsibility of domestic disaster agencies and sector ministries and secretariats, even though all the other sub-regional, regional or international components of the disaster reduction chain need to support them.

In this light, we grasp fully the importance of the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM) which was established at the first Inter-American Meeting of Ministers and High Authorities of Sustainable Development, in December 2006, in Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Given the practical knowledge and experience of domestic agencies, the network is expected to support South-South Cooperation among OAS Member States for the sharing of knowledge and practical experiences in implementing the National Platforms.

And while we endeavor to increase investments in vulnerability reduction and disaster mitigation so as to reduce risk, there is still much more we can do together to better respond to emergencies in the Americas. We ought to respond collectively and decisively to implement the various and far reaching existing instruments and mechanisms we have at hand for disaster response.

At a workshop on Disaster Assistance and Disaster Management that I personally convened earlier this year, delegations agreed on the urgent need to review and promote the implementation of these instruments.

For its part, the OAS General Assembly just passed a resolution, in San Pedro Sula, to form a joint working group composed of member states' representatives, assisted by country experts and supported by the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation, to begin the process of joint assessment of existing legal and cooperation instruments and mechanisms in disaster mitigation and disaster management towards the preparation of an Inter-American Action Plan.

In closing, I must recognize the long standing collaboration between the SG/OAS and the UN in the area of disaster management and disaster risk reduction in the Americas, dating back to 1977, when the Secretary General of the OAS signed an agreement with the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator concerning the coordination of disaster relief in the Americas. More recently, on June 6 of 2007, at the First Session of the Global Platform, the General Secretariat of the OAS and the UNISDR entered into a Cooperation Agreement for advancing the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action in the Americas and the Inter-American Strategic Plan. And, earlier this year, on March 17-19, our Organizations co-convened the First Session of the Regional Platform. We look forward to continuing this collaboration with UNISDR and partners of the Inter-American and UN Systems aiming to improve the lives of our most vulnerable communities in the Americas.

Thank you.