

Opening Remarks by the Chair of the Second Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction

**Mr. John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Emergency Relief
Coordinator, and Chair of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction**

Geneva, 16 June 2009

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me repeat my welcome as chair to this Second Session of the Global Platform. Let me first of all say how delighted and encouraged I am by the large number and the seniority of representatives attending today – more than 1800 participants and even more coming, from 309 organizations, including 169 governments. Your presence and participation are clear evidence that disaster risk reduction is increasingly and finally being accorded its place in the international community's efforts to combat disaster.

The Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction is the world's principal forum for tackling the growing problem of disasters. In this room we have ministers and mayors, development practitioners and civil protection experts, scientists and educationalists, engineers and doctors, charities and the private sector, and many more. It is exactly this wide range of stakeholders and this blend of expertise, experience and responsibility that we are going to need to address the complexities of disaster risk effectively.

The central purpose of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction is simple but challenging – to increase worldwide commitment and ensure sustained action to reduce disaster risks. And our biggest single challenge is to get our message out and acted on. Those listening to this speech this morning do not need to be convinced – they already are – but many key decision-makers out there still have to be persuaded to act. We all have a part to play in this.

The problem we face is immense. Last year, 236,000 people lost their lives in over 300 disasters – in earthquakes, floods, storms, landslides and other destructive events. More than 200 million people were directly affected, and damages exceeded 180 billion US dollars.

We now know that disasters are increasing in most regions of the world. Losses are rising. Poor urban governance, vulnerable rural livelihoods and declining ecosystems are key drivers of growing disaster risks. Climate change simply adds to this potent brew. Disasters lead to poverty and poverty leads to worse disasters. Developing countries are disproportionately affected, and poor groups within developing countries are particularly hit. And this is the effect on millions of people now, not the potential effect on polar bears in the future.

These are among the key conclusions of the Global Assessment Report prepared by ISDR partners that was launched last month in Bahrain. Top experts in the field of disaster reduction have worked over the last two years to assemble and analyse a massive new body of data, and to report on worldwide progress on disaster risk and its reduction. I urge you to read and study the evidence this report presents. It is an outstanding report, with very clear evidence and very clear conclusions.

We already knew that the combination of population growth and rapidly increasing urbanisation was leading to hugely greater risks in some of the world's biggest cities, many prone to earthquakes or floods or both. A billion people in unsuitable, unstable slum areas means the chances of a mega-disaster in one of these mega-cities are rising all the time.

Moreover we need to be fully aware that women are particularly vulnerable to the impact of disasters and climate change, no doubt largely due to the prevailing gender inequality in our societies. Women comprise 70% of the world's poor. In Asia alone, 95 percent of the female-headed households live below the poverty line. And disasters tend to exacerbate this existing inequality. So we need to make disaster risk reduction gender-sensitive. On 22 April, in Beijing, in China, I had the honour to attend the International Conference on Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction. I made a personal commitment there to draw all your attention to its outcome. I ask you all to take action in your particular capacities to make disaster risk reduction gender-sensitive, and ensure that women become active participants in disaster risk reduction rather than being stereotyped as passive victims.

Excellencies,

The task we have this week is to decide on the steps needed to increase global commitment and ensure sustained action to reduce the risk of disaster. We must assess progress on implementing the Hyogo Framework. We must identify the key areas where accelerated action is needed. We must share experience and learn from good practice, and improve global awareness. And by Friday, we must have outcomes that are as concrete and achievable as possible.

An overarching theme of this Second Session of the Global Platform is the linkages between disasters, poverty and vulnerability. We also need to focus closely on the issue of climate change, for two reasons.

Firstly, we know that climate change will increase the frequency and intensity of weather and climate hazards and will deplete and stress the planet's ecosystems upon which we all depend. For poor communities particularly, this means being increasingly squeezed between more extreme weather patterns on one side and diminishing capacities to adapt and protect themselves from disaster on the other.

Secondly, a new global agreement on climate change will be decided in Copenhagen in December this year. There are good prospects that it will strongly acknowledge the role of disaster risk reduction in adaptation. I am heartened that the draft text introduced to climate change negotiators recently in Bonn includes specific reference to disaster risk reduction strategies and to the Hyogo Framework. But we have to keep up this pressure.

The point is that there is no better time than right now to intensify our efforts to incorporate disaster risk reduction into the planning regimes that deal with the burning issues of poverty and

climate change. Sharing many common causes, these problems also share many common solutions. We therefore have a prime opportunity to support climate change policies with sound evidence and advice. I am happy that some senior climate change negotiators are present with us today. I am also happy to say that we are aiming to have a Carbon Neutral Global Platform this week – you will hear more about this later.

Let me turn to the outcomes that we must seek to achieve over the next four days.

The details will emerge from what you say here, from the lessons, the advice and commitments that you express. As Chair I will be listening carefully and will do my best to capture all your thoughts in my report in the end. But already I believe that we need significant advances in four key areas.

First - increased investment in disaster risk reduction: this is fundamental and we need more specific initiatives, both in a technical sense and in terms of investment policies and mechanisms.

Second - the integration of disaster risk reduction into climate change adaptation and development planning: we need urgently new ideas on how to achieve this in practice, including through adaptation financing, and with clearer advocacy messages.

Third - the acceleration of community resilience and livelihood protection: mature methodologies and extensive civil society capacities are available, but these need more systematic support and stronger government-civil society partnerships.

Fourth - the planned Mid-Term Review of the Hyogo Framework: clear principles and directions need to be settled, so that the review becomes the powerful tool we need to advance our shared goals.

Underlying these suggested outcomes is the need to move disaster risk reduction into the core decision-making processes of Governments, and to incorporate risk reduction approaches as an integral part of planning strategies in all sectors, at all levels of government, including through community-based action. Put plainly, disaster risk reduction is not an optional extra, like fine furniture in a house, but a foundation of the house itself. It is the very essence of our obligation to future generations.

For my part, I am happy to report that the United Nations has recently established guidelines on mainstreaming disaster risk reduction for its development organisations and programmes, as an initiative of the United Nations Development Group and with the support of the UNISDR secretariat. This gives us a better platform for the urgent action we need to see.

I also want to acknowledge the invaluable contributions by the national platforms, fifty of which have already been established, and Hyogo Framework national focal points for the disaster risk reduction work in their respective countries and regionally.

I am also pleased to announce two further initiatives to support action in vulnerable countries.

Firstly, a “Help Desk” for disaster risk reduction will be created in order to provide Governments with systematic access to information on organisations, networks and tools needed to support their disaster risk reduction efforts. This system will be developed by the UN’s ISDR framework and will involve ISDR partners as prime sources of information and support.

Secondly, I have asked the UNISDR to quantify, to the extent possible, the levels of existing investment in risk reduction. The rationale for this is simple – we cannot argue forcefully for new or expanded investment in disaster risk if we have only vague ideas about the types and amounts of investment that are already being made.

This will be a formidable challenge, not least because the financial data are not readily available and because risk reduction actions do not neatly fit into compartmentalized boxes. But approximate and incomplete information will be better than nothing for those who need it – that is Governments, donors, and implementing agencies, all concerned with adaptation policies.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The way forward is clearer now than ever before. We have used the five years since Kobe well, but not well enough. We are still too often sleepwalking into disasters. The threats are rising, and now is the time for substantive and measurable action. Let us be bold and commit to specific targets and action, as called for by the Secretary-General. Let us put the tools at our disposal to work – the Hyogo Framework, the ISDR system, the UN System, all our networks of experts, and the vast repositories of scientific, engineering and social knowledge. Let this meeting create positive and practical outcomes that truly increase global commitment.

I look forward to hearing a wide range of voices and perspectives this week. As diverse and unique as they may be, there is one overriding common denominator in our discussion: we need global action, and we need it now. We need to invest today for safer tomorrow.

Thank you for your participation and for your individual and collective contributions to the vital work ahead. I look forward to invigorating and productive conference.