

**SPEECH BY MARGARETA WAHLSTROM, UNITED NATIONS
SECRETARY GENERAL'S SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR DISASTER
RISK REDUCTION
at THE ASIAN CONFERENCE ON DISASTER REDUCTION
17 JANUARY 2010, KOBE, JAPAN**

Your Excellency Minister of Disaster Management Mr. Hiroshi Nakai

Professor Shigeru Itoh, Chairman of the Asia Disaster Reduction Center,

Mr. Kenzo Oshima, Senior Vice President of JICA

Distinguished participants at Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

- It is a great honor to be here with you today at this important Conference to have the opportunity to share some thoughts on the progress on and the challenges for the continued work by nations and communities when they plan for and respond to disasters and development needs. And all this in the context of the rapidly growing understanding of how climate change will affect our life styles and economic opportunities.
- As we meet here in Kobe in a commemoration for the victims of the earthquake 15 years ago, allow me to express our profound sorrow for the catastrophe that has struck the people of Haiti and my condolences to the many families in Haiti who have suffered grave losses. The United Nations has suffered serious loss of lives in Haiti

and I include respect for my colleagues in Haiti who have lost lives and suffered injury in the devastation in Port-au-Prince.

- We are at an important juncture in time as there has been considerable progress in countries and internationally on the understanding of the necessity for risk management and risk reduction. And much demonstrable progress and success in reducing risk can be recorded. However, on the threshold of a breakthrough in acceleration in risk reduction practice, leaders and decision-makers and individuals seem to be hesitating – holding their step. Let us consider in this meeting why and what we as risk reduction policy makers and practitioners can do to accelerate actions.

Looking back,

- Considerable progress has been achieved in the past 15 years, since the Great Hanshin earthquake. There has been a significant shift from focusing mainly on preparedness and response to understanding and acting on risks, their causes, their trends and the measures that can be effectively taken. Increasing are the efforts to study and manage risks in a multidimensional and coherent manner. Significant knowledge has been generated and policies developed, and certainly international cooperation efforts have been increased. The adoption of the first United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000 was a result of this increase of goodwill, understanding and commitment. In 2005, the adoption of the Hyogo Framework for Action has marked another critical step of no return by articulating

and determining priorities areas for action, thus promoting better cooperative models at international and national levels. Governments, communities, civil society organizations, international organizations and scientific community have reached a high level of cooperation and providing the hope for accelerated action.

- The common challenge and, at the same time, opportunity that we have is precisely to work to fully leverage and use this potential to effectively address the challenges posed by increasing risks and exposure.
- However, sadly, tragic and preventable loss of life and infrastructure in the recent Haiti Earthquake has once again showed that development without appropriate risk reducing measures can be wiped out in few seconds in mega disasters.
- While significant improvements in the science of forecasting cyclones and floods has reduced the loss of lives from weather-related disasters, the science of earthquake prediction is still struggling to predict earthquakes and make a better use and interpretation of the available data. The International Commission on Earthquake Forecasting for Civil Protection called by the Italian Civil Protection in the aftermath of L'Aquila earthquake in April 2009 carried out a study focusing on state-of-the-art methodologies for earthquake predictability. The study concluded by saying that whereas reliable prediction is not yet possible, the impact of earthquakes can be mitigated by building better, and that applying

stringent building codes and seismic retrofitting regulations is the most effective measure communities can adopt to ensure seismic safety.

- Governments play a fundamental role in legislation and regulatory frameworks that set and enforce seismic building codes and monitoring system. The state of the art seismic resilient building technologies pioneered in Japan are of critical value. Recently in Nepal recently and observed the demonstration of shake table test to demonstrate the strength of building techniques in face of seismic forces being supported by the Government of Japan. The ISDR system is now focusing on a global campaign for disaster safe cities with disaster resilient schools and hospitals so that seismic safe building standards pioneered in Japan and other countries can be made accessible to other countries whose vulnerability to seismic risk is very high but where capacity is still limited.
- The ISDR system Global Assessment Report for Disaster Risk Reduction 2009 (GAR09) notes the increasing trend for disaster is impacting poorer countries more severely, in terms of increasing economic losses, albeit human fatalities are fortunately not increasing due to better early warning and preparedness actions. The report also highlights that vulnerability has been reduced due to public actions, mitigation measures in the last few decades, but not sufficiently to offset the growing exposure to risk of increased populations and their growing economic assets located in hazardous areas.

- Tropical cyclone mortality risk in low-income countries is approximately 200 times higher than in OECD countries, for similar numbers exposed. Highly developed countries like the US and Japan suffer from greater absolute economic loss, due to greater value of assets exposed to disaster risks. However, poorer countries experience higher losses in relation to the size of their economies. In the case of floods, for example, South Asia experiences approximately 15 times more economic losses with respect to the size of its GDP, than the OECD countries.
- Water, disasters, climate change and development are intrinsically linked. Excess or shortage or lack of water – flooding, flash floods, mudslides, and drought - account for well over half of all disaster loss statistics. The water sector has long experience in addressing water risks and has developed the approach of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), which provides a natural entry point for water-related disaster risk reduction. More work is needed to expand global efforts to advocate, support and coordinate efforts to reduce water-related disaster risks, forge linkages with climate change policy processes, and support stronger political leadership on water-related disaster risks.
- The triple challenge of reducing poverty, reducing loss of life and property from disasters and adapting to a changing climate remains and the Hyogo Framework is a critical instrument to strengthen and focus international and national cooperation efforts in this regard.

2010 is the year of the mid term review of the Millennium Development Goals – at the same time as we do the HFA mid term review. There is an opportunity in this.

- Human and economic losses due to disasters can be reduced. The education and public awareness efforts need to constantly emphasize that losses can be reduced and impact mitigated through knowledge and appropriate action. In most countries around the world, far too little investment is made in public education and awareness. Japan has much important experience to share in this regard which also demonstrates success.
- **Ladies and Gentlemen**, what is the specific action to focus on in the next phase of work to counter the growing threat of disasters in order for us to protect our development gains?
- First, we have to improve our understanding of hazards, in particular climate hazards. We need to build our understanding of both historical and future hazard trends, and their impacts on our lives so that we can make the most cost effective decisions in our development and investment planning. UNISDR is working closely with World Bank and UN system to create regional risk assessments which can be used to assist target public investments in disaster resilient cities, schools and hospitals. The ISDR secretariat is now starting the work on the second Global Assessment Report in 2011, focusing on the practice of how to reduce disaster, and ISDR also support the IPCC in the work to produce a special report on extreme

weather events through support to authors with risk reduction and risk management expertise.

- In this context, it is to be noted that last 31 October, in this very same city, Ministers from China, Japan and the Republic of Korea signed a trilateral joint statement on disaster management cooperation, wherein the three countries agreed, among others, to share information and technology on the countermeasures to disasters. An agreement made more important as it is recognized that the trend is towards more frequent and intense climate related disasters .
- Secondly, we need to scale up our work in reducing vulnerability, which is probably best done both in short-term and medium-term development processes like UN Development Assistance Frameworks or UNDAFs, national development and sectoral plans, Strategic National Action Plans for DRR (SNAPs), NAPAs, etc. Recently in Nepal, ISDR system worked with government of Nepal to initiate a 134 million dollar programme to reduce floods and mitigate seismic risk of schools in Nepal.
- Another way to remove barrier to implementation of risk reduction plans is to engage change agents and demonstrate by example and good practice. ISDR is supporting a global network of community and women's groups and parliamentarians to stimulate direct national action in favor of disaster reduction.

- Scaling up action will require, increasing investments in disaster risk reduction, Last July the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction recommended that 1 percent of national development plans and 10 percent of international recovery assistance as well as 10% of relief fund should be invested in disaster reduction measures.
- Lastly, how do we reduce risk exposure. This is likely best done by using medium to long-term development processes, such as urban and regional spatial planning, land-use and city planning, reconstruction after disasters, etc. The GAR attributes increased exposure to economic growth. In the long-term, we need to have a strategic approach to decoupling exposure to disasters from economic growth, and this can only be done through better development processes.
- The upcoming reviews of the Hyogo Framework of Action and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide a unique opportunity to systematically and coherently address poverty, disaster and climate-related challenges.
- In particular, the ISDR secretariat is working closely with Governments, civil society and international organizations to undertake a mid-term review of the Hyogo Framework of Action. The mid term review will involve local, national and regional consultations to understand the effectiveness of a non binding global agreement like the HFA, and will provide insight into next steps for accelerating the implementation of the HFA in the remaining 5

years. The Mid Term review will also be linked to the review of the MDGs so as to suggest necessary shift to disaster proof the MDGs, e.g through global campaign of safe schools and hospitals.

- **Ladies and Gentlemen**, a few weeks ago, the climate discussions in Copenhagen showed us:

1) Recognition of risk issues and disaster risk reduction; inclusion of specific reference to build "on the HFA, as appropriate"; and note of other risk reduction areas like assessments, early warning systems, insurance and public awareness. The HFA reference is a very significant achievement.

2) Very visible increased commitment at the highest levels of government, with so many heads of governments present and actively negotiating an agreement.

- The talks in Copenhagen point us to the concrete opportunities for leadership and therefore effective responsibility the disaster reduction community has. In particular:
- We need to articulate better and simplify our knowledge for a more and practical use by senior political actors, including further develop and articulate an understanding of the economics of disasters and risk reductive policies; to be coherent in our common messages and engagement in order to help governments and state machineries to structure their decision making and actions in a more inclusive

manner around critical areas such as safer schools, hospitals, and other social critical infrastructures;

- Ladies and Gentlemen, we will have more extreme weather, but we know and can do a lot to avoid its worst impacts. Five years ago today, 168 countries at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction here adopted the HFA in Kobe. The commitments for cooperation and action are very much alive and our hosts for this meeting, the Government of Japan, have contributed much to this process. I take this opportunity to invite all of you to reinforce cooperation and action.

Thank you.