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10 lessons learned from the South Asia tsunami of 26 December 2004

Sálvano Briceño, Director

Inter-agency secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

Almost 2 weeks following the deadly tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of people in the Indian Ocean region, Sálvano Briceño notes 10 valuable lessons to be learned from the disaster.

1. We are all vulnerable to natural disasters.

The tsunami affected a total of **50 countries**, of which 11 were directly affected. An additional 39 developed countries were indirectly affected by losing nationals who were present in the region, either tourists or expatriates. While disasters often tend to be localised, affecting a specific region or community (e.g. Bam earthquake), we must remember that disasters do not recognise borders and can affect entire regions (e.g. 2003 hurricane season in the Caribbean).

2. Coastal zones and small islands are often densely populated areas that increase people's risk and vulnerability.

Nearly 3 billion people, or almost half the world population live in coastal zones which in many cases are prone to hazards including tropical cyclones, floods, storms and tsunamis. Often coastal populations are dependent on the sea for their livelihoods (e.g. fishing villages) and do not have the choice to live elsewhere. Small island countries such as the Nicobar and Andaman islands are barely a few metres above sea level, which means that evacuation to higher land is almost impossible. Governments and local authorities need to take human habitats into consideration in long-term development planning, ensuring that risks are minimised.

3. Public awareness and education are essential to protecting people and property.

In Thailand more than 1,800 people were saved because a tribal chief recognised that there was something wrong and decided to evacuate his people up to the hills. A 10-year-old girl from England saved 100 tourists on a beach in Phuket after alerting her mother of the imminent tidal wave and prompting a speedy evacuation to safety. She recognised the signs after learning about tsunamis in her geography class. Knowing what to do and when to do it is the key to save. In Japan, Hawaii and Cuba children know from the early age what to do if tropical storms, cyclones or earthquakes strike.

4. Early warning saves lives.

In Kenya, thousands of people were immediately evacuated in Mombasa because they were alerted to the wave making its way across the Indian Ocean. While the appropriate technology to detect seismic activity already exists, a failure in communication meant that the relevant authorities and local communities were caught unaware by the tsunami. The high level meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia is a first step. The World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan next week will be another opportunity.

For more information, please contact:

Brigitte Leoni
Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy
for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR)
Tel: +41 22 917 49 68
Email: leonib@un.org
www.unisdr.org

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5. Countries need to work together at the regional and international levels ahead of time, instead of waiting until disaster strikes to respond.

There is a need for countries in the Indian Ocean to develop a regional early warning system focuses on tsunamis. The tsunami highlighted that other regions at risk have no regional early warning in place, such as the Caribbean and countries along the Mediterranean coastline and need to have one as quicker as possible.

6. Reducing risk depends on communication and information exchange between the scientific community and politicians.

The disaster showed that in the absence of an open dialogue, valuable information and research from technical sectors is redundant. We need to strengthen the link between scientific institutions and national and local authorities that need to react to avoid human, economic and social losses from disasters.

7. Develop and enforce building codes in areas where earthquakes and tsunamis are common.

The damage to buildings has been huge. It could have been reduced if building codes and retrofitting measures had been taken. Past tsunamis taught us that people are safer in high ground. After the Bangladeshi flood in the 70s, government decided to build all the key buildings with two or more storeys. In the Maldives, a lot of people who escaped went up to the top floor. Cement is a resistant building material that could be used more frequently specially for strategic buildings. Clearly, the further away you are from the sea the safer you are - new legislations may need to be considered for the construction of hotels and tourist sites in coastal zones.

8. Humanitarian aid needs to invest more in prevention and go beyond food, medicine and immediate needs.

Donor funds need to think about the longer-term and include prevention in aid packages. If we are able to collect 3 billion dollars in two weeks we should be able to spend 10 per cent of it in prevention. We are trapped in a reactive rather than proactive development trajectory.

Reconstruction should take place keeping in mind disaster risks. We can no longer afford to rebuild buildings which will collapse again in the face of a similar disaster.

9. International, regional and national organizations should work better together and be better coordinated.

Coordination is an essential element of disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response the entire UN system, governments and non-governmental organizations. Efforts need to be made to promote complementarity and avoid duplication. Governments need to demonstrate their political will and commitment to disaster risk reduction through concrete measures, e.g. reserve national budget line for disaster reduction, strategic donor funds to support and build capacity for disaster risk management.

10. The media have a social responsibility to promote prevention.

Journalists need to be sensitised and maintain an ongoing focus on prevention aspects of disasters. We must remind ourselves of the disasters happening on an almost daily basis around the world, e.g. locusts in Western Africa, drought. Not to be overlooked is the media's role is essential in early warning systems; this disaster could be a trigger for the media to play a more active role in improving lines of regional and global communication thanks to new media technologies.

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