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By
Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia

at

World Disaster Preparedness Day Celebrations 2005

New Delhi, India
31 December 2005

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**DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Excellencies; Dr Trivedi; Distinguished Scholars and Teachers;
Colleagues and friends; Ladies and gentlemen;

I thank the organizers for inviting me to be here on the occasion of World Disaster Preparedness Day Celebrations. The year 2005 has been unprecedented; not only in terms of the number of disasters and conflicts, but also in their magnitude.

The earthquake and Tsunami of 26 December last year affected more than 3 million people with over 200,000 deaths. The earthquake in Pakistan in October this year caused more than 100,000 deaths. Besides, houses and important facilities such as health centres and hospitals, as well as schools, were severely affected.

The heavy monsoon floods this year gravely affected the State of Maharashtra and other areas in India. The situation, indeed, posed a challenge for logistics, supplies and protection of human health.

At the same time, we have had incidents of some man-made emergencies. The examples are: the chemical explosion in Ryongchon, North Korea, last year, and industrial accidents and mine collapses in China this year. Additionally, social conflicts that recently led to riots, in France and Australia, have been significant events.

Whatever type of a disaster it may be, whether natural or man-made, it is the community itself that is the first to cope with it. It is what the people in the community know and are able to do that can lead to the first line of action in the prevention of a disaster or in reducing its impact.

The importance of the community to be well informed about disaster risks and hazards can never be overemphasized. Through various tools for education, information and communication, disaster risk reduction and preparedness can be engrained in people. This will lead to the culmination of a “culture of safety” in the community that can thrive and become sustainable.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The importance of public education in this connection is obvious. Indigenous knowledge and risk management strategies are valuable, and must be integrated into disaster preparedness and response programmes. It is this indigenous knowledge base that needs to be recognized, used and further strengthened, instead of being ignored.

At the same time, disaster risk reduction through new knowledge or knowledge from elsewhere, should be provided to the community. This is crucial because, in general, the community may not fully understand the local hazards and risks, or know the full range of protection measures. Therefore, a proper balance between local knowledge and new evidence is very important for public education on disaster management.

In this context, proper channels of communication should be used for such education. Whether they are in the form of posters, leaflets, folk media, or TV and radio announcements, these should be well thought of and planned, in order to achieve the desired outcome. Imparting appropriate knowledge through schools is critical for a well prepared or disaster-proof community.

Many emergency preparedness and response programmes introduce and discuss various disaster issues in schools. In Myanmar, this educational aspect is integrated into the primary school curriculum, along with text books dedicated to the subject. The same can be observed in Bangladesh, Japan and several other countries where the concepts of disaster risk management are taught in schools.

At higher levels of education, the focus on disaster management and risk reduction has increased over the past ten years. This is particularly so in areas of architecture, engineering, development studies and health sciences. Both non-degree and degree programmes on Disaster and Humanitarian Work are now being offered in universities all over the world.

Furthermore, certain subjects relating to disaster mitigation and risk reduction have become the focus of attention in many of the degree courses. These subjects include Construction of Safer Buildings, and Sustainable Water Resource Management. In collaboration with educational institutions, WHO has also embarked on postgraduate education in Public Health Management During Crises.

A regional course on Public Health Emergency Management for Asia and the Pacific (PHEMAP) is being offered. This course has been developed and is run jointly by the WHO Regional Offices for the Western Pacific and South-East Asia and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre in Bangkok. In the past five years, about 200 professionals have completed this course and are working in their own countries at national and sub-national levels.

They are well equipped with better skills in managing emergencies when disaster strikes. This PHEMAP course is also being adapted to suit specific country situations, and is being offered to train more people at the local level. Education and empowerment of the community will be an integral part of this course. The first national PHEMAP course was held earlier this month in Sri Lanka, with participation from various sectors .

Excellencies; Ladies and gentlemen,

There is no doubt about the need to integrate disaster risk management into various educational programmes, whether for the general public through various channels of communication or for particular groups of persons through additional and higher studies. It is very important in this educational process to provide the learners with an opportunity to study the real events.

The use of case studies and examples is indeed more effective, than a series of lectures and mere readings. In the context of disaster risk management, using a mix of approaches is always more effective. The mix may change over time as a result of new technologies. However, educators and managers of educational programmes should be able to cope with such changes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Available literature does not document much evidence on the impact of the educational programmes on disaster risk management. There are some inherent problems in measuring such an impact. Therefore, education for disaster preparedness and response should also be supported through other means. This is in order to ensure that specific knowledge can transform itself into timely and effective action when emergency strikes.

These days people are also getting educated on what to do in an emergency situation through several government programmes. An example is the cyclone shelters in Bangladesh. The development and maintenance of these shelters are supported by communities and various sectors. As a result, the country is able to face and cope effectively with the hazards of cyclones and floods in a very systematic manner, through community and multisectoral actions. Keeping all these issues in mind, there are several steps to take us forward.

One of them is the exchange of information between and among communities and countries. This information should also include elements that can help educate and empower the people to reduce the disaster risks and impact. Increasingly, the World Wide Web has become a source of information, and a tool for educators, as well as web “surfers” of any age.

Indeed, information and communication technology has provided everyone with new and more effective options in learning. Distant and open-learning approaches should also be maximally utilized in disaster education. This is to train a greater number of people in a shorter time frame.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You, as teachers, have an important role indeed to play in achieving the goal of this noble task. The circumstances to achieve this goal are challenging, but need perseverance and unstinted attention. Educational programmes can have a critical impact on disaster risk reduction, if properly developed and implemented. The investment in educating people on disasters, hazards and risks can bring us a long way in improving the safety of populations.

Such an investment can lead to a “culture of safety” that contributes to better health security. Finally, let me wish all of us a safer and more secure world in the coming years.

Thank you.