

Opening Remarks

By
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at

***Regional Meeting on the Health Aspects of Emergency
Preparedness and Response***

Bangkok, Thailand
21-23 November 2005

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REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Distinguished participants,

Representatives of partner organizations,

Guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

- With great pleasure, I warmly welcome you all to this regional meeting.
- As we all are aware, approximately 200,000 lives were lost due to the earthquake and tsunami at the end of last year.
- It was one of the worst catastrophes of our times.
- The tragic event affected nine countries, and displaced an estimated 1.2 million people.
- This was in spite of the prompt response by the governments of affected countries and international organizations.
- Never before had we seen such global solidarity, unity and concerted efforts of all stakeholders, to come forward to help the affected populations.
- This year, powerful hurricanes caused large-scale devastations in the Southern region of the United States.

- And most recently, strong earthquakes severely affected several areas in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan.
- Currently, more than 30 countries throughout the world are facing major, and often long-standing crises.
- As many as 500 million people in these countries are affected, or at risk due to these phenomena.
- Worldwide, it is estimated that between 2-3 billion people are at risk of disasters; either natural or man-made.
- It is unfortunate that this part of the world happens to be disaster-prone.
- Countries in the Region have experienced several catastrophes during the recent years.
- These include the earthquake in Gujarat (India) in 2001; chemical blast in Ryongchon (DPRK) in 2004; bomb blasts in Bali (Indonesia) in 2002 and in 2005.
- These are in addition to the yearly monsoon floods in South Asia.
- The worst episodes were in 1998 and 2004 in Bangladesh.
- Adding to these are the continuing political and social conflicts in several countries of the Region.
- These conflicts very often create disastrous events, affecting large groups of population, that require emergency response of various magnitude.
- The frequent occurrence of such events indicates the urgent need for effective emergency preparedness and response at all levels.

- International agencies have joined hands to develop more responsive strategies.
- The strategies that can support countries more effectively in their efforts to save lives and reduce suffering of the affected populations.
- The World Health Assembly last year reaffirmed the need to strengthen countries' capacities in emergency preparedness and response.
- This was to enable them to protect their populations efficiently during emergency situations.
- The capacities required for effective management of disasters include, among others, risk assessment and development of national multisectoral policy and strategy.
- The ultimate goal is to enable countries to be able to plan and coordinate effectively all activities relating to emergency preparedness and response.
- In addition, the countries will need to develop monitoring and warning systems to forecast future catastrophe.
- Through education and communication, the information should be provided to people and the community, to enable them to be prepared to respond effectively to the emergency situations.
- Not less important, such information should also aim at dispelling myths about health consequences of disasters.
- People and the community should be prepared to help reduce the extent of destruction to physical infrastructures, including health facilities in the affected areas.

- The WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia, at its session this year, provided direction on several key issues.
- These are particularly for Member States to move forward urgently in strengthening their national capacities in this priority area.
- This direction is in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action, 2005-2015, for Disaster Risk Reduction.
- The Framework addresses specific gaps in the present responses to emergencies.
- It also highlights challenges that disasters pose to communities and populations around the world.
- In addition, the Framework expresses concerns with many related issues in almost all areas of emergency response.
- These areas are preparedness, including risk assessment; management of emergency; recovery; rehabilitation; reconstruction; and other critical aspects.
- WHO, as the health arm of the UN system, works in close coordination with other partners, including those outside the system.
- The ultimate aim of WHO's work during an emergency is to help the countries in their efforts to save lives and to mitigate the suffering of their populations, as much as possible.
- This involves primarily the identification of appropriate mechanisms to help countries to coordinate all players efficiently during an emergency.
- Coordination mechanisms at the country level are an important part of national strategies and plans for emergency preparedness and response.

- Keeping in mind the lessons from various disasters, it is important to view all interlinked issues relating to disaster management from a broad perspective.
- To be effective, risk management and emergency response have to be carried out through multisectoral cooperation and actions.
- At the same time, international agencies, including WHO, will have to review and further strengthen their own capacities to ensure more effective support to countries.
- The health component should be considered as an overriding concern in national emergency preparedness and response.
- Within their own potential, communities and people must be empowered to respond efficiently and effectively to emergency situations, at least during the first hours.
- This will help curtail further damage and destruction to the extent possible, before the arrival of assistance from outside.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- This regional meeting is aimed at developing concrete steps to strengthen emergency preparedness and response in countries.
- With our common concern, and through our combined wisdom, it will be possible for this aim to be successfully pursued during the course of the meeting.
- Health needs in emergencies must be responded through the most efficiently organized efforts of all stakeholders and players.
- This requires mechanisms and processes that can ensure coordinated, synchronized and prompt actions for the best response to those needs.

- During this meeting, we will delineate benchmarks for our endeavours, and evolve a strategic framework and direction, for efficient coordination and combined efforts.
- The framework and direction that can guide countries to move effectively towards the achievement of the best health protection of the affected populations.
- This is an important forum to share our experiences and lessons; and work together towards that end.
- This may be only the beginning of a long process.
- The process which we will have to pursue jointly with countries, in both the short and long-term horizons.
- So far, however, some countries have launched programmes on emergency preparedness and response with commendable results.
- These are :
 - preparedness in Bangladesh for floods and cyclones;
 - strengthened capacity in community mental health during an emergency in Thailand.
 - efforts to mitigate damage to health facilities in Nepal;
 - updated legal framework to support disaster management in Sri Lanka; and
 - decentralized preparedness and response in India and Indonesia.
- The experiences in Maldives, Bhutan, DPR Korea and Timor-Leste are also worth learning in this regard.

- WHO is currently involved in building a regional information base, and network of expertise in this area.
- This will be another important tool for supporting countries in planning to address future emergencies in a more effective manner.
- WHO will continue assisting countries in their endeavours to develop and improve EPR programmes, in both the short and long terms.
- To conclude, on behalf of WHO, I would like to convey our appreciation and thanks to all countries, organizations;
- And others who share concern and responsibility to protect the health and welfare of populations affected by disasters.
- Our grateful thanks are also extended to the countries and organizations that provided funds and other support to WHO during the previous crises.
- Given the sheer magnitude and the very wide scope of the catastrophic events, no one organization or sector can carry out the relief operations alone.
- Let us come together for better outcomes from our combined efforts in helping the affected countries and populations.
- We are looking at the way forward, whereby our unified direction and united strength will help us successfully overcome the formidable challenge of disaster management.
- Finally, I wish you all success in your deliberations and a pleasant stay in Bangkok.
- Thank you.

