

Inaugural Speech

By
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At

***Regional Consultation on Emergency Preparedness and
Response: From Lessons to Action***

Bali, Indonesia
27-29 June 2006

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REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Distinguished participants,

Representatives of partner organizations,

Guests,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I warmly welcome you all to this Regional Consultation. It is an opportunity for all of us to learn from the past, in order to be able to cope better in the future. This is particularly so in countries of the South-East Asia Region, where risks and hazards of various types are prevailing.

We have seen time and again that communities and nations have been able to cope with these events. Just a month ago, Indonesia witnessed a devastating earthquake in Yogyakarta. More than 6000 people died, over 20000 were injured, and 100000 to 600000

were displaced. In this event, two things stood out clearly. The first was that preparedness is vital. Joint preparations by the government and all concerned sectors with regard to the eruption of Mount Merapi helped to put in place important resources that were easily mobilized for the earthquake. Secondly, the lessons from the tsunami were demonstrated. A strong response by the government provided the desired direction to all humanitarian actors.

It is also worth mentioning that the operational guidelines developed during the tsunami helped in the emergency in Yogyakarta as well. A well-developed health system provides a strong base for an emergency response. The provincial health system of Yogyakarta is well resourced with health facilities and health professionals. The system that is in place can cope with the surge of patients. Assistance was mobilized from neighbouring provinces, and international support helped to augment what was already on the ground. We, in WHO, also learnt important lessons. We were able to better support the Ministry of Health in this emergency. We were able to coordinate better within the Organization and with partners. Our effectiveness and efficiency was demonstrated through prompt provision of necessary supplies and staff. It is heartening to note that we were able to respond quickly and effectively. Yet, there still are many emergencies that we have to face. We had a crisis in Nepal this year; the Timor-Leste civil conflict; and the floods in Northern Thailand. We can share the lessons learnt and apply them in the different contexts and circumstances. It is, therefore, important to revisit and discuss our experiences, with the view to derive the maximum gains from such lessons.

At this point, distinguished participants, I would like to refer to the tsunami. It is exactly one and a half years since it struck six countries in the South-East Asia Region. It

was one of the worst natural disasters in recent history. It caused unprecedented destruction; killing hundreds of thousands of people, and affecting a population of more than two million. The challenges were really enormous. There was no time to lose. We had to respond quickly and effectively, especially in the emergency phase.

At the same time, we had to work in a coordinated manner with all stakeholders. In such a difficult situation, WHO spared no efforts in supporting the affected countries. The very first attempt was to save lives and mitigate the suffering of the people. Because of the magnitude of the devastation, the tsunami emergency and recovery phase lasted for very long, that is for one and a half years. Now, it is time to focus more sharply on rehabilitation and reconstruction. Before we move on, we must reflect on what we have done well, and where we could have done better. This is with the view to make the best use of these lessons for the future. At this meeting, we will review what has been done for the tsunami, and learn new lessons. We will also recapitulate the major directions and activities for rehabilitation and reconstruction. In the process, we can identify gaps and actions needed for countries in the Region to enhance country capacity for emergency preparedness and response in the Region. We have made good progress following the tsunami. We, together with countries:

- (i) Have set up disease surveillance systems;
- (ii) Developed community mental health programmes;
- (iii) Strengthened emergency preparedness and response, and
- (iv) Improved the systems for management of wastes and water resources.

These are just a few examples. Psychosocial needs of the tsunami-affected people contributed to the changes in mental health legislation in Sri Lanka. Changes in the supply management system in Maldives were brought forth, mainly as a result of the response to the tsunami. In India, the government has improved its emergency coordination through a National Disaster Management Authority.

We cannot, however, become complacent as the tsunami revealed many gaps in our response. These were in the areas of policy, legislation, planning, human resources, operation and coordination. In almost all areas. In many countries, there was no disaster management system in place, so response was delayed due to confusion about what needed to be done, and by whom. In some places, financial resources did not come through quickly, and therefore the response was held up. People with different skills and expertise were needed, but mobilizing them took time because there was no resource database. In many places, facilities collapsed because they were built without disaster-resistance in mind. Coordination among communities, districts, national governments, international agencies and nongovernmental organizations was not smooth. The global response was tremendous, but to be effective, it needed to be efficiently coordinated. The tsunami has demonstrated that the better prepared a country is, the more effective it can be in responding to any disasters.

We know that emergency preparedness is a part and parcel of national development. It is essential for governments to include it in their national development strategies and plans. This year, the World Health Assembly, once again, underlined the need to strengthen the capacity of Member States in emergency preparedness and response. Last year, the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia also provided

direction on several key issues so that Member States can move forward rapidly in strengthening their national capacities for emergencies. WHO has assisted countries in strengthening their capacities in the health sector. To this end, in November last year, we invited representatives from all our Member States in the Region to a meeting to discuss various related issues. This meeting then identified a number of key benchmarks that every country should aim to fulfil in mitigating disasters. These benchmarks include, among others:

- (i) A legal framework and functioning coordination mechanism;
- (ii) Disaster preparedness plans and standard operating procedures (SOPs);
- (iii) Community-based response and preparedness capacity;
- (iv) Risk identification and vulnerability assessment, and
- (v) Trained human resources; disaster-resistant health facilities and early warning systems.

Last month, when the earthquake struck Yogyakarta, we saw how important it was to meet these benchmarks. Indeed, the theme of this meeting is also to put together what we have learnt and how we can apply them in emergencies. Let us take them forward in the next three days as there is no end to learning. We need to keep ourselves constantly updated on all aspects of management of emergency. Let us keep the momentum moving towards better systems for emergency preparedness and response. This is with the view to ensuring that we will be able to cope with any emergencies in the most efficient and

effective manner. Only then can we say that our efforts have not been in vain. In conclusion, I wish you the most productive deliberations; and a pleasant stay in Bali.

Thank you.