

## **Opening Remarks by John Holmes**

### **Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Emergency Relief Coordinator, and Chair of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction**

#### **SDN Week High Level Panel: “Investing in Disaster Prevention for Sustainable Development”**

**February 20, 8:30 AM, Preston Auditorium**

Madam moderator, fellow speakers, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I am delighted to be here to help introduce this important part of the SDN Week.

Let me begin at the beginning, which is usually a good place to start. Why are we here? Because, today, more people are threatened by natural hazards than at any time in history. For example, the economic cost of disasters has more than tripled over the past decades. Over the period 1995-2004, a total of two and a half billion people were affected by disasters, with 890,000 deaths and US\$ 570 billion of losses.

Now, as you know, there are many factors behind this but let me single out perhaps three; the growing concentration of population and assets in vulnerable areas, climate variability and change, and a general lack of commitment to ensure that all development efforts are disaster proof.

Disasters do not only have short-term consequences. One single disaster event can erase years of development and investments, locally, nationally, regionally or even in some cases globally. We all remember the devastating impact of Hurricane Mitch. The most recent example in national level is cyclone Sidr, which hit southern Bangladesh, causing a 16 foot tidal wave destroying one of the largest mangrove forests in the world, damaging 1.4 million houses and killing over 4,000 people. Sidr was one of the 10 strongest windstorms in recorded history.

So the link between disasters and development is bound to be a major concern for institutions like the United Nations and World Bank which are committed to supporting the poorest and most vulnerable countries in their efforts to achieve the development targets set out in the MDGs. And if we factor in the climate change scenarios of the recent IPCC Assessment Report, this concern can only increase hugely. If we do not act urgently, the chances of some disaster-prone countries of reaching some of the key MDGs will be fatally undermined.

The plain fact is that efforts to reduce the risk of disasters have strong links with the climate change and poverty reduction agendas. The links between disasters and poverty are clear and simple. It is the poorest who are worst affected and the real effects of climate change are already being experienced by poor countries through increased climate variability and extreme weather events. For example, we issued 15 humanitarian flash appeals for natural disasters last year, five more than in any previous year and 14 out of 15 were for extreme weather-related events. This combination of climate change, disaster risk and poverty reinforces social, economic and environmental vulnerability. The importance of this was recently recognized, I am glad to say,

in the Bali Plan of Action which includes disaster reduction as a key element in the agenda of adaptation to climate change.

The United Nation's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) in partnership with the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR). This is a subject which seems to generate acronyms, and I have to say not very memorable ones. ISDR and GFDRR are developing common tools to address these disaster and climate change risks. Because a strong and fully integrated approach is required if we are going, in reality, to decrease poverty, reduce disaster risk and adapt to climate change impact.

Today's event is an important message to the international community that the World Bank and the United Nations take the issue of disaster risk reduction seriously. We are both completely committed to this agenda and we are working in close collaboration. Indeed, the ISDR and the World Bank have been building an innovative and successful partnership which I believe should be seen as a flagship of wider UN-WB collaboration. It reflects the ISDR and the World Bank spirit of inclusiveness and coherence and has become a main driver in our effort to develop a joint work programme for the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action, which brings together altogether 12 UN agencies, the World Bank and the ISDR Secretariat.

ISDR and the GFDRR share a results-oriented approach. We have a shared sense of the dramatic urgency of the task we have ahead. One significant success of the partnership is the strong regional engagement through existing regional institutions in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, South Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. All these regions are making disaster risk reduction a priority in their regional development plans. This encourages not only stronger national political commitment, but also the exchange of good practices and experience within and between regions. At a global level, we have put in place a mechanism to monitor progress in the implementation of the Hyogo Framework, a central clearing house function (Prevention Web), and effective and coordinated thematic platforms run by a number of ISDR system partners.

The financial support of the World Bank has played a vital role in these early steps. The engagement of the GFDRR is a recognition and endorsement by the Bank that the ISDR is an effective mechanism for global and regional coordination. Through this endorsement the Bank recognizes in particular the importance of creating a global and regional enabling environment. Country level capacity building and commitment remain absolutely essential. Engaging through the GFDRR helps precisely to ensure that global and regional activities are targeted at strengthening national capacities. At the same time, it reinforces the fundamental need for recovery efforts to have a strong disaster risk reduction component, the famous 'building back better' doctrine.

Ladies and Gentlemen

These are critical times for disaster risk reduction. It is three years since the Hyogo Framework was adopted. It is also three years since the Indian Ocean Tsunami shocked everyone into recognizing the importance of more preventative approaches to disasters. But the truth is also that real awareness at political level remains patchy at best, and adaptation is still a poor relation to mitigation in the global focus on climate change. So we have a long way to go. As one

contribution to raising awareness, the UN and the World Bank have initiated a major study on the Economics of Disaster Risk Reduction, aimed at bringing out the empirical evidence on the cost-benefit of disaster risk reduction, not least the cost of inaction for future generations. I am confident that this study will underpin on arguments in convincing and forceful way when it is completed, and as it is taken forward over the next year or so.

Today we have an opportunity to hear from representatives from developing countries and colleagues from both the World Bank and other institutions on what measures they are taking to reverse the current trend in disaster impacts, and to tackle some of the challenges I have identified. I much look forward to these exchanges and to valuable conclusions which will help inform all our work in the future. The issues and challenges are clear and, as I said at last year's Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction, there is no time to lose.

Thank you for your attention.