



**Symposium on Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems
For Integrated Disaster Risk Management**

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Keynote Speech by

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Secretary-General,

Distinguished participants, colleagues and friends,

It is a pleasure to be here today to speak at this Symposium on Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems for Integrated Disaster Risk Management.

First of all, I wish to express my gratitude to WMO, through its Secretary-General for organizing the Symposium. WMO, comprising a global network of National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs), has championed the cause of disaster risk reduction and supported the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) in many ways – and from the very early days of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR, 1990-1999). It is great to see this commitment sustained and strengthened today.

The task of strengthening early warning capabilities is all the more pressing, as we are reminded time and time again of the human economic and social toll arising from natural hazards. According to the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), in 2005, over 89,000 people were killed by disasters triggered by natural hazards and over 160 million more were affected. We also know that these statistics do not reflect the many smaller disasters, which have long-term localized impacts and are setting back hard-earned

development gains. The World Bank is paying increasing attention to disaster risk reduction as a means to protect project investments.

Many of these hazards were predictable. Windstorms and floods continue to dominate disaster figures in recent years. They accounted for more than two-thirds of all the disastrous events recorded and no less than 90% of the economic losses caused by natural catastrophes.

We also need to pay heed to the fact that global temperatures are noticeably increasing. Recent findings appear to back up the projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that climate change will give rise to more extreme weather-related events in future.

I am mentioning these facts to remind us of the enormous potential devastation of natural hazards. Our vulnerability to natural hazards, whether in developing countries or highly industrialised regions, poses a major threat to our social and economic progress that we can no longer ignore. We need to be much better prepared.

As the Deputy to the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations, Jan Egeland, I am engaged with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which has a unique mandate to

coordinate international response activities both in overall complex emergencies and so-called natural disasters. In our efforts to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with various actors, OCHA also advocates for the rights of people in need; promotes preparedness and prevention; and facilitates sustainable solutions.

In addition to this, and since the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR), January 2005, Kobe, I am also entrusted by Jan Egeland to support the strengthening of the United Nations mechanisms for disaster risk reduction and in particular the ISDR system. Both the USG and myself are committed to this area of work and we are particularly encouraged that leaders from other key institutions such as the United Nations Development Group, the World Bank, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as well as WMO, of course, have also committed to support this new ISDR process and to create a strong international agenda to support the most vulnerable communities increase their resilience to disasters.

Today's Symposium provides an opportunity to increase our understanding of what constitutes an effective early warning system as a core component of disaster risk reduction. The agenda for the symposium has been developed knowing that early warning systems need must be based on quality science and effective technology, and also importantly a sound understanding of

vulnerability and risk and strong awareness from decision makers and communities alike. And of course, early warning systems are also a key decision making tool to support effective emergency preparedness and response.

If appropriately developed early warning systems save lives. Last week, typhoon Chanchu hit the China south coast. Based on the predictions of the Chinese Meteorological Administration, 905,000 people were evacuated prior to the typhoon's impact. The previous week, authorities declared Mount Merapi, an active volcano in Indonesia, in danger of imminent eruption. Scientists, based on observations of the volcano and historical evidence, feared that the dome of the volcano, which is leaning southward, might collapse. This assessment led to the evacuation of more than 34'000 people.

What may seem like rather straightforward news items, reflect rather complex processes, involving many players - technical institutions, local communities, education specialists, the media, and government bodies. National and local authorities, often through disaster management agencies have the responsibility to issue the warning and manage the evacuations, with the assistance of institutions such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.

Unfortunately, despite these warnings, in the case of the typhoon in China eight people died in a collapsed house and many more died as the typhoon swept the

Philippines. While in the case of the volcano in Indonesia, despite the high level of risk, people are starting to return to their home at the foot of the volcano.

It is important to note that the concepts of what constitutes an effective early warning system have been developed internationally through a broad consultative process over many years. Let me point out the landmark events.

- In 1994, the **first World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction**, held in **Yokohama** one of the Principles endorsed by Governments states that early warnings and their effective dissemination are key factors to successful disaster prevention and preparedness;
- **The three international conferences on early warning¹** were held on the subject produced a set of internationally agreed guiding principles for effective early warning systems as well as the outline of a programme on early warning to reduce disasters². The latest one held only a month ago in Bonn, brought together over 1500 practitioners and experts from 130 countries.

¹ (1) International Conference on Early Warning Systems for the Reduction of Natural Disaster (EWC'98), Potsdam, Germany, September 1998. (2) Second International Conference on Early Warning (EWC-II) – 'integrating natural disaster early warning into public policy', Bonn, Germany, October 2003 (3) Third Early Warning Conference (EWC-III) - From Concept to Action, March 2006.

² The international Early Warning programme entitled: "Effective Early Warning to Reduce Disasters: The Need for More Coherent International Action" was formerly launched at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDR).

- Encouragingly, the **World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)** held in Johannesburg, called for the strengthening of the ISDR and early warning systems within the sustainable development policies and action plans;

- It is also worth mentioning that, following the **Indian Ocean tsunami**, there was a rapid recognition that many lives and assets would have been saved had an effective early warning system been in place in the region. This led to an unusual development – for the first time, an urgent issue related to disaster risk reduction - in this case early warning - was integrated in a UN Humanitarian Flash Appeal;

- The most important development for our work today, however, is the adoption of the **Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters** in Kobe, Japan, January 2005. the Hyogo Framework identifies risk assessment and early warning as one of the five priority areas of focus for the coming ten years;

- Another relevant development is the call by the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, for a **global survey of early warning systems** in his report ‘In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all’.

The report of the survey was launched by Jan Egeland at the 3rd International Conference on Early Warning in Bonn on 27 March this year. It contains many specific recommendations for action and I encourage you to read it carefully.

As a natural consequence of the above processes, the ISDR system is being strengthened to assist the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action, with wider participation of governments and a stronger focus on achieving specific agreed priorities.

I strongly believe that the key to the successful implementation of disaster risk reduction and effective early warning systems lies in the power of partnerships coupled with a clear respect for the capabilities - and accountabilities - of all parties. Partnerships are crucial to build collaboration, deliver on commitments, and to create added value.

This Symposium is an excellent example of the partnership principle. I expect it will contribute greatly to fleshing out a more detailed agenda for the International Early Warning Programme (IEWP) that was called for at the second International Early Warning Conference (EWC-II) and that is now supported by the Platform for the Promotion of Early Warning (PPEW), Bonn, Germany. The IEWP, as part of the revitalized ISDR system, aims to support the

early warning agenda through the promotion of partnerships and advocacy. It is increasing the involvement of new and under-heard voices in the early warning dialogue, alongside the experienced technical early warning organisations, to help ensure that early warning programmes are developed with thorough understanding of the particular needs of each community and to put real meaning into the idea of multi-hazard early warning systems.

However, despite these international efforts, a glance over the various risk reduction and disaster preparedness programmes as well as disaster response operations being carried out in different parts of the world shows that there is still a considerable gap between scientific and technical knowledge of early warning and the capacities of Governments and communities in utilizing such knowledge to minimize both disasters risks and negative impacts. The ISDR system needs to better incorporate and make use of the high levels of available scientific and technical expertise in all aspects of its work.

The report of Global Survey of Early Warning Systems states that the weakest elements concern warning dissemination and preparedness to act, in both developed and developing nations. The Survey identifies the root causes for this problem to be inadequate political commitment, weak coordination among various actors, lack of public awareness and lack of public participation in the

development and operation of early warning systems. Let us bear this in mind during the next two day's discussions.

I would like to express Jan Egeland's and my own commitments, through OCHA and the ISDR to support all practical steps for strengthening the implementation of effective early warning systems, as an essential requirement to protect populations, to reduce disaster risk, and to effectively implement the Hyogo Framework. I therefore look forward to the conclusions and recommendations that emerge from your discussions.

I thank you for your attention.