



**ODUMUNC 2011**  
**Issue Brief for the**  
**Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**

***The Review of Disaster Preparedness and Response to International Crises***

**By: Tasawar Baig**  
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*“Lives can be saved and the destruction of property minimized when natural disasters strike if governments invest adequate resources in disaster risk reduction measures”.*

**Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (19 March 2010)**

*“City planners must ... tackle the principal sources of risk in urban areas – poor governance, planning and enforcement. Decision-making should be inclusive and participatory and the principles of sustainable urbanization must be embraced and upheld, especially for the benefit of people living in slums and informal settlements. Reducing disaster risk is everybody's business, and needs everyone's participation and investment – civil society, professional networks as well as municipal and national governments.”*

**Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (13 October 2010).**  
**Message for the International Day for Disaster Reduction**

## **Introduction**

Human history is facing continuous crises due to natural or human-made disasters. A persistent struggle to deal with these crises remains the top priority agenda for each society. By doing so, it fosters the respective societies to overcome on the other implications caused by these disasters or international crises. During the contemporary era, the United Nations has contributed tremendously to mitigate the political conflicts vis-à-vis creating a social consciousness among member countries to deal with natural disasters.

During the last few decades, the United Nations has embarked on a challenging journey to bring all member nations on a common agenda in order to strengthen the concept of preparedness for humanitarian emergencies, as well as to create a nexus between coordinated provisions for humanitarian assistance. More importantly, however, is the UN's role in identifying the humanitarian needs for affected populations and generating more resources through commitment by member states and other agencies to deal with humanitarian emergencies. UN agencies have in recent years become vigilant with “humanitarian assistance operations in highly hazardous or insecure and unsafe environments”.

## **Current Assessment, Need and Impact**

Since natural disasters and crises are constant phenomena in our daily lives, the best option is to develop our abilities with respect to preparedness and appropriate responses to deal with these crises. According to the United Nations Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), it is estimated that in 2009 above 236,000 people died in over 300 disasters and more than 250



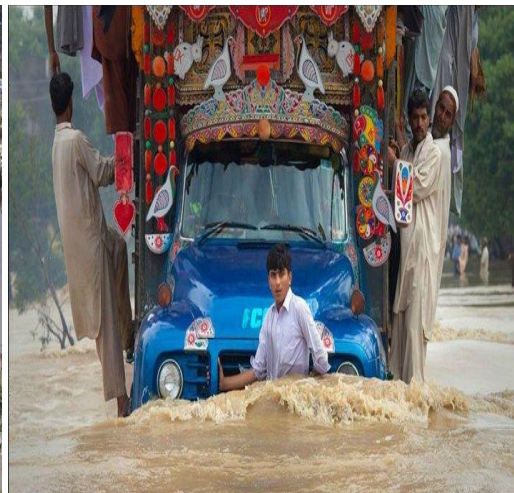
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million were directly impacted by earthquakes, floods, tropical storms and landslides. These disasters caused \$180 billion in damages. It is very much obvious that today all countries have a common challenge. Almost 200 million people are affected by natural disasters every year. Many countries are affected directly and by and large indirectly from these incidents. According to a UN report, nearly 70% of humanitarian work was primarily due to conflicts. It is observed that by and large conflicts and threats posed to peace and security emanate from food insecurity resulting from conflicts. Official assessments show that 75% of people who died from flooding in recent years are from just 3 countries. Moreover, 17 times more people died from tropical cyclones in the Philippines than in Japan, despite both countries being exposed to the same threat. Japan's better preparedness resulted in less damage than in the Philippines. Likewise, the earthquake in Chile caused fewer deaths despite the magnitude of earthquake being an 8.8 on the Richter scale, the fifth largest since records began. In contrast, we saw thousands of people die in Haiti, though the intensity of that earthquake was lower than Chile, primarily because Haiti lacked earthquake resistant structures and was poorly prepared to tackle such risks.

Today, Asia is the most vulnerable continent for disasters, mainly posed by natural hazards. During 2008 and onwards, Asia has been hit hard. Estimates show that almost 140,000 people died in the Myanmar cyclone Nargis; more than 5 million homes collapsed in an earthquake in China; during recent floods in Pakistan more than 20 million people became homeless, and, according to World Bank, floods in Pakistan raised the total damages above \$10 billion. In this connectivity, first, countries should be properly prepared to withstand with these kinds of natural disasters. Secondly, the post-disaster situation is another important phase, especially to provide appropriate care. It involves primarily the rehabilitation and reconstruction process and





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proper coordination between agencies and donors to make a proper assessment. In this regard, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) can play an effective role, as it contributed admirably in Haiti. The UN World Health Organization (WHO), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and other agencies faced acute problems after disasters occurred during 2009 and onwards. Hundreds of health facilities, hospitals, clinics, and schools were damaged or totally destroyed, which exacerbated and caused more problems and high death tolls. The WHO, UNICEF and other agencies stress for spreading more "education, public awareness, community-based preparedness, life skills and the erection of disaster-resilient buildings as ways to curb disaster risk for children".

In the future, most of the risk from disasters will be faced by many populations that settle in cities, though, according to United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), more than one billion people live in slums and are basically under high risks from hazards. However, by 2030, studies predicted that 60% of the world population will be living in urban areas or cities and one cannot stop cities from growing, but one can plan in a sustainable way. Therefore, urban planning demands foresight and much more attention to potential risk from disasters. If poor attention is given to the buildings on floodplains, above quake fault lines or on land-slide-prone areas, then disasters can potentially be much more severe than ever imagined, as we experienced in Haiti, China, Philippines, India, Pakistan and many other poorly prepared and ill-planned regions of world.

### **Response to Risks**

In recent years the entire international community has witnessed intense disasters. Therefore, by and large, UN member countries are inclined to strengthen the push for disaster risk reduction, and permeate a better understanding of preparedness both conceptually and in practice. In response to growing risks, the United Nations placed disaster risk reduction high on its agenda under the Hyogo Framework for Action. The Hyogo Framework for Action is a 10 year plan to make the globe safer from risks and disasters posed by natural calamities. This framework was adopted by 168 governments in 2005 with a commitment to prevent, mitigate and prepare to tackle natural hazards. To date, many governments have failed to follow their commitments on practical grounds, which has caused unredeemable destruction to their respective societies.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stressed on preparedness that "*the UN is ready to help governments build preparedness at the country and regional levels. Donor nations need to fund disaster risk reduction and preparedness measures .....adaptation to climate change in particular*



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*means investing in systems for disaster reduction, preparedness and management.....to prevent natural hazards turning into disasters, we must all act sooner and act smarter”.* Those countries which are at high risk but had effective preparedness plans reduced their risk. For instance, in 1970, Bangladesh experienced loss of huge number of human lives, more than 500,000 people during Cyclone Bhola. After this traumatic disaster, Bangladesh subsequently built 2,500 cyclone shelters on elevated concrete platforms. Bangladesh also trained more than 32,000 volunteers, who are helpful in evacuations and rescue operations during any natural disaster.



The UNISDR office has launched number of ISDR training centers in order to deal with ‘Urban Risk Reduction’, and therefore, the 2010-2011 World Reduction Campaign is focusing on making cities safer from disasters. Major countries from the developed and developing world are following the agenda, ‘*Making Cities Resilient: My city is getting ready*’ to face any risk. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is very much keen to this campaign, as South East Asian countries continue to face risks from a variety of natural disasters. The major donor countries like the United States contribute to the campaign financially and by sending human resources to help disaster struck regions of world; for example, the US supported Haiti post-earthquake and also helped assist the flood-affected populations in Pakistan. During FY 2006, the US contributed \$3 billion for humanitarian assistance. In the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, it further endorsed the continuation of humanitarian assistance<sup>1</sup> in various affected areas of world.

<sup>1</sup> *‘The President (of United States) can provide emergency humanitarian assistance through several sources whose funding is authorized and appropriated by Congress. These are funds appropriated to the Office of Foreign Disaster Administration (OFDA) in the Agency for International Development (USAID); U.S. Department of Agriculture food aid programs under P.L. 480 Food for Peace and Section 416 (b) of the Agriculture Act of 1949; the State Department Emergency Refugee and Migration Account (ERMA) a contingency account that can contain as much*



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On 15 July 2010 a substantive session of Economic and Social Council adopted resolutions on strengthening humanitarian assistance, and recognized the linkage between emergency response, rehabilitation and development. One panelist during the session, Mr. Saroj Kumar Jha, Manager & Head of the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) at the World Bank, said that *‘poverty was the greatest multiplier of vulnerability. Studies had shown that 75 per cent of disaster hotspots in the world were populated by moderately and extreme poor people and one third of the world’s poor lived in those hotspots. Natural hazards grew into “unnatural disasters” due to the vulnerabilities of societies’*.

### **Conclusion**

Natural disasters and resulting crises have been recognized as a vital agenda of United Nations and other regional and international organizations. Most of these actors advocate for the preparedness and proper emergency education so that future risks can be prevented or mitigated. In December 1989, the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 44/236 which designated the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday of October as the International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction. And as discussed above, the adoption of Hyogo Framework of Action is a continuity of this process. It is important for all member states of United Nations, regional blocs, donor

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*as \$100 million for assistance to refugees fleeing persecution; and funds appropriated to the Department of Defense, Overseas Humanitarian and Disaster and Civic Aid (OHDACA)’. (Source: CRS report for Congress).*



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agencies and international non-governmental organizations to extend their full cooperation to pragmatically follow their commitments; otherwise, looming disasters can cause even greater destruction.

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