
Min. Samarasinghe addresses 2nd Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, Geneva

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Address by Mahinda Samarasinghe MP Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights at the Second Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction Geneva, Switzerland 17 June 2009

Mr Chairman, It is both a pleasure and a privilege for me to address this Plenary Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction. The conduct of this conference at this juncture is particularly apposite as it follows close upon the launch of the biennial "Global Assessment Report: Risk and Poverty in a Changing Climate", which is a significant milestone in the annals of global disaster management. We in Sri Lanka welcome this landmark document launched recently by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which also publicized the Mortality Risk Index which is a very interesting and potentially useful new tool in the hands of planners, policy makers, development specialists and disaster management personnel the world over. As a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and a country that participated in the development of the South Asian Comprehensive Regional Framework on Disaster Management adopted by the SAARC Council of Ministers for the 2006 – 2015 period, Sri Lanka notes with concern that some countries in the SAARC sub-region are placed relatively high on the index. In this context, our efforts at regional disaster risk reduction must be redoubled and as most of our countries are beset with poverty and other developmental challenges, an integrated and holistic approach must be adopted in keeping with the global strategies and modalities, such as those developed and refined through forums like the Global Platform. Mr Chairman, Sri Lanka has made vast strides in developing a structured and scientific approach to disaster management. Sri Lanka was one of the countries that bore the brunt of the catastrophic tsunami of December 2004. At that time our preparedness and ability to respond left much to be desired. Since then, we have, with the support of several international partners and friends, devised normative and institutional frameworks and put in place a forward looking and integrated strategy to place disaster risk management at the forefront of all aspects of national development planning. We have adopted a 10-year Road Map for Disaster Risk Management at the national level and have participated in the regional framework I mentioned earlier. Both these initiatives are fully emulative of the Hyogo Framework for Action, 2005 to 2015. These initiatives are good examples of regions and countries evolving regionalized and localized initiatives in keeping with globally agreed-upon frameworks. I await with particular interest the outcomes of this conference which is expected to bring together national best practice in mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in national development planning. This is something that we in Sri Lanka are keenly interested in and are greatly encouraged by a global focus on this most important aspect of any integrated development strategy. Moving from disaster-sensitive national development planning to integrating disaster risk reduction as a core component of the planning process is a development that we wish to see coming to fruition. Another expected outcome is the harmonization of DRR with climate change adaptation and development strategies which, to me, is a corollary of the first major outcome. Climate change is a global phenomenon which needs prioritization on the world's agenda as it has implications not only for development but for the very survival of some members of the international community. We fully endorse and support the Global Platform's focus on climate change adaptation as one of the key feature of the deliberations during this week. Another matter that we are keenly interested in, Mr Chairman, is the evaluation of the Global Assessment Report and its potential to devise new strategies for Governments and civil society actors to further cooperation in DRR and other aspects of disaster management. The identification of lacunae such as information on droughts – in addition to tropical cyclones, earthquakes, floods and landslides which the Index is broadly based on – in developing the MRI leaves us much work to do and we must work together in a spirit of cooperation to further enhance this tool which will make it an invaluable tool in planning for better disaster risk management. Mr Chairman, We also look forward to the rigorous review of the Hyogo Framework for Action and the assessment of where we, individually and as a global community, have come in fulfilling the aims and objectives of that framework. I am certain that, through the use of online tools provided by UN ISDR, will help us gain a better understanding of where we stand vis-à-vis the Hyogo Framework. I am also sure that the more than forty thematic special events scheduled, that are intended to complement and support these plenary sessions, will provide subject specific outcomes that we can all take on board. These interactions will assist in prompting not only greater investment in DRR which is an objective of this forum but smarter, better targeted investment. Mr Chairman, I was fortunate to participate in the International Conference on Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction in Beijing 2 months ago. Inasmuch as we have come to recognize that DRR is a critical component of development planning, we must view gender issues, governance, sustainable development strategies and the maintenance of socio-political stability as inextricably linked and cross-cutting facets of any national policy framework. It is by recognizing the importance and value of affording men and women of all races, creeds, linguistic backgrounds and cultural affinities the equal opportunity to contribute to DRR, governance, peace building and development, that we can truly evolve equitable solutions that can guarantee a better and safer future for the world's peoples. The outcome I referred to earlier in my statement, in relation to government-civil society partnership, will help greatly in supporting and fostering inclusive DRR and development. To my mind, information sharing and building of community resilience and capacity to contribute to DRR as well as the fostering of necessary attitudinal changes are a key contribution that civil society actors can make in complementing and enriching government-led initiatives in relation to DRR. Mr Chairman, My country – Sri Lanka – has just overcome a human-made disaster of a magnitude unparalleled by any similar recent events elsewhere. We have overcome the scourge of terrorism that has beset our island nation for well over two decades. From a humanitarian standpoint we have now moved into a "care and maintenance" phase which is the initial phase of early recovery. Our Government, the Government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, has taken on the task of

reconstructing a nation which has suffered much in its efforts to reunite its people ensuring that all Sri Lankans are now able to lay claim to one, undivided territory as their common motherland. A coordinated and comprehensive programme has recently been launched for the north of Sri Lanka which will mirror our achievements at restoring normality in the east. All our efforts at renewal rebuilding and resettlement, however, will be put at risk if the causal factors of the conflict and terrorism are not addressed and our President has committed himself to evolving a home grown political response to those factors. Borrowing from DRR methodology, our political response will reduce the risk of a renewed human-made disaster, i.e. terrorism and conflict, through systematic efforts to analyse and manage the causal factors, evolve consensual responses and improved preparedness for adverse events. We do not for a moment think that Sri Lanka's national renewal will be quick or easy. There are ever-present threats that we must, and will, guard against, including the threats of new violence and destabilization. As we move forward on the path to a safer tomorrow for all Sri Lankans, we look to the many good friends of Sri Lanka for their understanding, support and cooperation in helping us achieve our objectives. In conclusion, Mr Chairman, let me place on record our appreciation for the good work done by UN ISDR under the able stewardship of Sir John Holmes, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Madame Margareta Wahlstrom, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction. We in Sri Lanka are fully appreciative of the work done by UNDP and UN OCHA in assisting us with our efforts at building our national capacities relating to DRR in particular and disaster management in general. We look forward to closer collaboration with members of the UN family as well as our international partners and friends – through forums such as this and through bilateral cooperation arrangements – in our national efforts towards ensuring a safer Sri Lanka for all her people.