

Information portal on natural disasters needed, says OAS Secretary General

Chairing a high-level hemispheric meeting on natural disaster reduction, Secretary General José Miguel Insulza of the Organization of American States (OAS) suggested Monday that the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR) consider establishing a one-stop information portal on natural disaster initiatives in the Americas.

He told the hemispheric inter-agency forum—convened at OAS headquarters—that the portal could provide Member States as well as civil society and the private sector with an up-to-date overview of the inter-American system’s various programs, projects and policies as a strategic element of disaster risk management in the hemisphere. Insulza argued as well for better cost-benefit analysis on natural disaster reduction and better use of the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation, to produce more effective results while reducing duplication of efforts.

“The importance of addressing the mounting human, developmental, environmental and economic consequences of natural disasters cannot be overemphasized,” Insulza told the participants. “We are only half-way through the 2007 season, and already the countries of the Caribbean, Central America and the eastern seaboard of the United States have been hit by two major hurricanes—Dean and Felix—as well as eight tropical storms.”

Besides taking stock of progress in coordinating efforts, today’s meeting is also part of a process of preparing for long-term increases in the frequency and severity of major hurricanes and tropical storms in the region, according to Insulza. The head of the OAS said the Organization has been working with countries to begin estimating the longer-term impact of climate change, as data show droughts may be becoming more prolonged and more severe in certain areas of the Amazon and La Plata basins, and that heavy rainfall may be on the increase in other areas.

Inter-American Development Bank President (IDB), Luis Alberto Moreno, stated that economic costs associated with disasters are on the rise, far outpacing average economic growth in the region. Moreno also pointed to the impact on competitiveness, lamenting that countries often consider disaster prevention a cost rather than an investment. He identified other challenges, including the fact that disaster risk is not transferred through insurance, and spoke about strategies being explored, such as risk pooling and collective insurance schemes under an integrated risk management and financial strategy.

PAHO Director Mirta Roses Periago spoke about her organization’s role in the IACNDR and in emergency operations as well as collaborating with humanitarian organizations, underscoring the importance of strengthening information exchange to more effectively assist member countries with disaster response.

The meeting also provided opportunity for Member State and Observer State representatives and regional disaster and emergency response agencies in the Caribbean, Central America and Andean countries as well as the United Nations system to address pertinent issues related to natural disaster reduction efforts.

Established in 1999, the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction comprises the OAS Secretary General, with other members being the Chair of the OAS Permanent Council and the OAS Assistant Secretary General, as well as the IDB President; PAHO Director General; Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) Secretary General; Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) President; Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) Director General; Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) Chairman; and the Executive Secretary of the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM).