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American States

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Opening remarks

by

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Assistant Secretary General

**Second Session of the Regional Platform for
Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas**

Nuevo Vallarta, Nayarit, México

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Ms Patricia Sánchez Medina, General Secretary of Government of the State of Nayarit,

Mr. Hector Miguel Paniagua Salazar, President of the Municipality of Bahia de Banderas, Nuevo Vallarta, Nayarit,

Mrs Margareta Wahlstrom, UN Assistant Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction,

Distinguished Ministers and Vice-Ministers,

Ambassador Ernesto Céspedes Oropeza, Director General for Global Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

Ms Laura Gurza Jaidar, Director General of the Civil Protection,

Mr Magdy Martinez-Soliman, UN Resident Coordinator in Mexico,

Representatives of International, Regional and Sub-regional organizations,

Distinguished Delegates,

Colleagues from the Inter-American System,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed for me an honor and privilege to be here with you this morning in such a beautiful place and in the company of such a diverse group of individuals. At the outset, allow me to express my thanks to the Government Mexico for hosting this important Second Session of the Regional Platform for Risk Reduction in the Americas. I also wish to place on record my appreciation to our local hosts, the State of Nayarit and the Municipality of Nuevo Vallarta for the excellent hospitality extended to me and the delegates since our arrival.



Ladies and Gentlemen, we have gathered as a very diverse community here today with one common purpose: to discuss ways to reduce disasters, to help our most vulnerable communities to become more resilient, and to prevent and mitigate the impact of natural hazards. We have to be better prepared so that, when natural hazards strike, we can manage them effectively and efficiently to avoid the loss of human life and the suffering of our sisters and brothers around the Americas and indeed the world.

Let us remember the recent earthquake and tsunami which hit Japan and caused enormous physical damage and resulted in many thousands losing their lives, an ongoing tragedy that has the full attention of the world community. We offer our condolences to the families of the victims and the Government and People of Japan.

I take this opportunity to commend the Government of Mexico for the leadership and determination towards the objectives and principles of the Hyogo Framework for Action and the commitment towards a collective approach in the Americas for reducing disasters.

Two years ago, when we first gathered in Panama for the First Session of the Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas, we were in the midst of an economic and financial crisis that uncovered the cycle of socio-economic development and disaster reduction. And while we seem to have emerged from that crisis and are on our way to sustained growth, recent events prove once again that sustainable development cannot be pursued successfully unless risk management is well integrated into development policy and planning.



Developments and challenges related to poverty, imbalanced and unplanned urbanization, poor governance, social exclusion and inequality, and deteriorating eco-systems exacerbate the vulnerability of small economies and most volatile communities to the externally generated financial and economic shocks, making it difficult for these financially strained economies to effectively and timely respond to the impact of natural hazards.

This Second Session finds us at the dawn of a new decade. The decade, to which we just said good bye, the 2001-2010, was marked in the Americas by devastating disasters that amounted to over 260.000 deaths and 440 billion US Dollars in damages. With more than 900 disasters recorded in our region, some come first to our memory.

The earthquake of January 12 of 2010 in Haiti, the deadliest of all, claimed the lives of over 220.000 people and affected more than 3.5 million. This disaster epitomizes best the underlying causes of disasters to which the Hyogo Framework for Action refers to, in the priority action number four, rooted deeply in failing development processes, extreme poverty and poor governance.

Hurricane Katrina, on the other hand, the most costly of all, in the summer of 2005, left behind a staggering path of damages for over 125 billion US Dollars, killing over 1.800 people and affecting more than 500.000. And while Katrina also underscored the issue of poverty in the richest nation in the Americas, it best typifies the trans-boundary impact of disasters.



But let's be clear on this, while hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunami's may not respect international boundaries, the impact of natural hazards do, because they are not the result of a natural phenomenon, but are due to poor planning and placement of vulnerable communities and infrastructure in the path of natural phenomena without consideration of the associated risks.

Katrina, however, is testimony to the way in which the impacts of disasters do cross state and international boundaries. While Katrina mostly impacted the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, whose combined GDP was only 61% of the GDP of Florida, and poverty rates in New Orleans reached 18.4% compared to national average of 11%, the impact of Katrina spread well beyond the three states and the US territories. With 95% of the refining capacity of Louisiana severed, US refining capacity was reduced to about 30%. And with only 1% of the US work force, it accounted for about 150 billion US Dollars of country's external trade in oil, steel, and grain. This in turn significantly impacted the fiscal accounts of the US, as well as GDP growth in Latin America and the Caribbean, as exports to the US were reduced.

Ladies and gentlemen, no corner of the Americas is immune to disasters; and while the poor remain the most vulnerable, unsustainable development, unplanned and fast urbanization, and environmental degradation are soon catching up, even with the wealthiest nations, communities and individuals. And in a globalized world with interdependent economies, disasters are no one exclusive business, but everybody's.



A simple look at these events, their causes and impact, leave us in no doubt that the aftermath of natural hazards is anything but natural; that risk is an integral component of development, which can only be reduced by investing in vulnerability reduction and disaster mitigation; and through sound governance that ensures participation of all government sectors and levels, as well as all segments of civil society, as well as enforcement of laws, rules and regulations and promotes best practices and incentives.

And this is what our Regional Platform is all about. And when I say our, I say of all of us, not the national governments alone, or the inter-governmental organizations and the international cooperation alone, but all of us, we all have a shared responsibility, individually and collectively. It is about sharing and integrating responsibilities and accountability. It is about working all together for one single cause, to reduce loss of lives and suffering, and instead achieving the well-being and prosperity for all.

The good news is that last decade was also marked by decisive progress in the formulation and implementation of policy and programs for disaster risk reduction in the Americas. Most recent are the reforms and programs set for by the Government of Peru in the aftermath of the 2007 earthquake that shattered the city of Pisco, with the creation of a Land Management Program, whose main purpose is to develop actions for the prevention of natural disasters, and the reduction of risk in the areas of housing, sanitation and urban planning; the Reconstruction Program with Transformation that the Government of Guatemala has just launched after the pass of Aghata and the eruption of Pacaya;



and the reforms undertaken by the Government of the Dominican Republic to make Risk Reduction a core element of their land use planning and development strategy and programs, to mention a few undertaken by national governments.

At the sub regional level, the work of sub regional intergovernmental organizations has been remarkable, such as the Central American Coordination Center for Disaster Prevention (CEPREDENAC) and its 2006-2015 Regional Disaster Reduction Plan; the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and its 2007-2012 Comprehensive Disaster Management Strategy and Programme Framework; and the Andean Committee for Disaster Preparedness and Relief (CAPRADE) that has prepared the 2005-2015 Andean Strategic Plan for Disaster Prevention and Response. In the MERCOSUR, the creation of the Specialized Meeting of Socio-Natural Disaster Reduction, Civil Defense, Civil Protection and Humanitarian Assistance, known as REHU, also marks a significant milestone in the past decade.

At the regional level, the adoption by the OAS Permanent Council of the Inter-American Strategic Plan for Policies on Risk Reduction, Risk Management, and Disaster Response, in 2003; and the recognition of the OAS General Assembly, in 2007, of the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation “as the permanent hemispheric mechanism for strengthening practical cooperation ... in the area of disaster reduction” represent two significant milestones.

Allow me now to speak to some of the challenges we will face in this new decade.



Increasing attention to Climate Change and the need to advance strategies and measures for Adaptation add a new layer of complexity to the integration of Disaster Risk Reduction into Development Policies and Plans. Inter-institutional coordination at all levels, but particularly at the national level, will become even more critical so as to effectively use existing, and in many case limited, financial resources to reduce vulnerability and mitigate disasters, while advancing Climate Change Adaptation strategies and programs.

The Second Hemispheric Encounter which took place in April of 2009, in Santa Marta Colombia, under the auspices of the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation, and in collaboration with UNISDR Americas and the Government of Colombia, yielded valuable lessons and recommendations in that regards.

Perhaps the single most important message that came out of Santa Marta is that investing in Disaster Mitigation is investing in Adaptation to Climate Change. Building capacity to prevent disasters today will build capacity to prevent them tomorrow. We must invest in the effective adoption of multi-hazard resilient building codes and in land use planning and zoning that integrates risk assessments with full consideration of Climate Change scenarios as a key component of Disaster Prevention programs. And being better prepared today will find us better prepared for tomorrow. Early warning systems for climate-related hazards, such as wind storms, floods and droughts, must make full use of advances in science and technology to increase preparedness time, by providing accurate weather and hydrological forecast.



Another challenge lies on the changing conditions in disaster response and humanitarian assistance. International Response and Humanitarian Assistance have been on the rise in the last decade, showing more Governments from within the region offering assistance in response and relief, as well as humanitarian assistance. And there are also an increasing number of non-traditional international humanitarian organizations that, all combined with lack of capacity in the assisted countries to identify their needs and manage disasters, result in lack of coordination of the international humanitarian assistance, response and relief efforts. Emergencies are becoming increasingly more difficult to manage. The need for a hemispheric coordinated mechanism for response and humanitarian assistance is an imperative and more relevant than ever before.

The OAS has been intensively working on this matter for the past two years as per the mandate of the General Assembly, and we commend our member States for their restless efforts in improving coordination and preparedness. Chaired by the Alternate Representative of Argentina, and with the Alternate Representatives of the Dominican Republic and Haiti as Vice-chairs, the Joint Working Group of the Permanent Council of the OAS has organized and presented five technical meetings in 2010 to evaluate the performance of the international response and humanitarian assistance in the past years, and is currently working on a diagnosis and action plan that we are all confident will guide our work in the years to come for a more effective and efficient response and humanitarian assistance. I am sure that delegations will share the findings of the Joint Working Group at the meeting and subsequently insert in the proposals from this Regional Platform to the Global Network meeting later this year.



Ladies and gentlemen, as much as we recognize the progress made at all levels, there is still a pending issue that has to do with need for a mindset shift or change in the way we consider risk reduction. In terms of the *Disaster Paradigm* we need to move from a *responsive* to a *proactive* approach; from one that sees disasters as natural events that bring destruction on to a few unlucky nations and communities to one that sees disasters as the result of socio-economic processes, where the few unlucky nations and communities are *NOT* so few. And from one that sees disasters as a problem of a few to one that recognizes that, in a global and interconnected world, disasters spread over and across municipal, state and international borders, making it a business of everyone.

In this regard I believe that the results of the First Session of the Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the Americas, back in April of 2009, must be embraced decisively. We must improve collaboration in our daily work. We must improve our ways to do business so as to ensure we use all our resources to their full potential, and avoid not only the waste of resources, but the creation of additional burdens on our governments and communities.

We have to use the academia and universities to their full potential to educate the policy and decision makers of tomorrow. We have to engage private enterprises to increase resilience of local communities and improve their standard of living. We have to work with community leaders and grass root organizations, religious groups and cooperatives, to organize our communities, to get them prepared and to assist them in reducing their vulnerability.



We have to coordinate the efforts of the international cooperation so as to optimize resources for the good of our most vulnerable people and not to the benefit of a few. And we must all work together under a single objective leaving aside our personal and institutional aspirations that do not contribute to the final goal.

Assistant Secretary General Wahlstrom, I would like to thank the secretariat of UNISDR for your support and commitment to our region, and for trusting our Organization in this partnership that began at the First Session of the Global Platform, back in June of 2007, when we first signed the cooperation agreement for “advancing the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action in the Americas and the (OAS) Inter-American Strategic Plan, ... seeking to optimize the use of resources throughout the region.”

I must recognize the outstanding work of all the individuals that made this event possible and, I am sure, a success. Special recognition goes to Liliana López Ortiz of the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, Ana Lucía Hill Mayoral of the General Directorate of Civil Protection of Mexico, and Ricardo Mena Speck, Head of the Regional Office for the Americas of UNISDR.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have no easy task ahead of us, especially given the realities of more and intense natural hazards affecting our economies and social life. We cannot avoid, nor ignore these harsh realities, all we can and indeed must do, is prepare to the best of our abilities.



As illustrated we have made progress at all levels, and we have to continue alerting politicians and legislators about the risk that natural hazards pose for peace, stability, prosperity and security and ultimately to democracy if countries and governments are not willing or able to adopt and enforce rigidly risk reduction strategies. Creating ownership and buy-in is not only required at the level of the citizen and local communities, political will and commitment at the highest level is equally critical.

Let me reaffirm the commitment of the Organization of American States to keep the threats posed by natural hazards high on the political agenda of the Western Hemisphere and to pledge that we will continue our efforts to work with our Inter-American partners, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Pan-American Health Organization and the Inter-American Institute for Agriculture, as well as other specialized institutions and agencies to coordinate our individual actions and serve the Peoples of the American in their aspiration for a better, healthier and safer life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have to remain hopeful. Experiences of the recent past have demonstrated that if we are prepared, that is if we enforce risk reduction strategies, comply with building codes and land use directives, etc. that it is possible to mitigate effectively the impact of natural hazards.

Let us therefore take these important experiences to heart and learn from the expensive and painful lessons and act with vigilance and resilience, not with complacency.

I thank you.