

SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL CONFERENCE

Strengthening Understanding and Cooperation on Disaster Management for a Disaster Free South Asia

Background

With the 15th SAARC Summit to be held in Colombo from 27 July to 3 August 2008, the **Sri Lanka National Disaster Management Coordination Committee** (NDMCC) took the opportunity to bring together key disaster management stakeholders from across South Asia at a regional conference. Participants included senior government officials, UN personnel and representatives from relevant civil society organizations. The conference was held in collaboration with ActionAid, Christian Aid, Oxfam American, Practical Action and Sri Lankan Red Cross.

The continent worst affected by disasters is Asia, and in South Asia the number and intensity of disasters is increasing. Natural hazards cross national boundaries and affect multiple countries in South Asia. A significant aspect of disasters is the differential impact whereby poor and excluded people are impacted the most. Disasters threaten to undo the development gains of recent decades against poverty, hunger and disease. The occurrence of a hazard does not mean that there will inevitably be a disaster – but much needs to be done in order to reduce the risks and strengthen community resilience.

In recent years, following the Second World Conference on Disaster Reduction at Kobe in 2005 and the development of the Hyogo Framework for Action, and the massive devastation resulting from the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, the October 8, 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, cyclone Sidur in Bangladesh as well as a host of other disasters, all the SAARC member states have been developing their legislative and institutional frameworks to address all aspects of disaster management including disaster response, preparedness, risk reduction and mitigation. It is recognized that if people, particularly women and those who are poor, have the necessary knowledge, skills, institutions, infrastructure, financial resources and linkages they will be more resilient to hazards.



*Secretary, Ministry of Disaster Management & Human Rights
inaugurating the Conference Photo: Khemraj*

Prior to the regional conference, national consultations were held in most countries to reflect on the country's progress on its commitment to achieving the priorities for Action as enshrined in the Hyogo Framework for Action which all SAARC member states have endorsed. National deliberations among key national government disaster management authorities, UN and civil society actors also considered the challenges they faced and the issues and opportunities for regional cooperation on disaster management. A realistic report of the current situation was prepared.

At the regional conference: “Strengthening Understanding and Cooperation on Disaster Management for a Disaster Free South Asia”, held on 15-16 July in Colombo, participants from each country presented their experiences and ensuing discussions deliberated on the progress made across the region. Some key factors noted as impacting on achievement are conflict and climate change.



The conference culminated with the preparation of a call for action to the SAARC Heads of the State (attached) which highlights the critical issues requiring both national and regional commitments necessary to achieve the dream of a disaster free South Asia.

Hon Minister, MDMHR, receiving the Disaster Free South Call for Action: Photo: Khemraj

The conference also concluded with a commitment by participants to strengthen cooperation between government agencies and civil society organizations for more effective disaster risk reduction in South Asia, and to take forward the call for action through concrete measures.

SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL CONFERENCE
Strengthening Understanding and Cooperation on Disaster Management
for a Disaster Free South Asia

15-16 July 2008, Colombo

Call for Action to the SAARC Heads of State

Today, people in South Asia, are facing increasing frequency of hazards – which are leading to high magnitude disasters in the region. People who are poor and vulnerable are most impacted by those disasters. At the same time, disasters are one of the causes making poor people poorer. Therefore, disasters erode development gains and pose a serious threat to the ongoing development initiatives by member states and are having far reaching consequences on the region as a whole, undermining the SAARC commitment to alleviate poverty and sustainable development.

The hazards and disasters in South Asia have a common nature due to shared geo-physical and hydro-meteorological features; and human interventions. In addition, the experience and root causes of disasters are common across the region. This reality provides the essential basis for the need, as well as the opportunity, for regional action. In this context, SAARC has created a solid foundation to address the problems.

The Heads of States are commended for adopting the SAARC Social Charter; establishing the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre in Male, the SAARC Meteorological Research Centre in Dhaka, the SAARC Centre for Disaster Management in New Delhi, and the SAARC Comprehensive Regional Framework on Disaster Management 2006-2015, in line with the recommendations of the Hyogo Framework for Action. The Heads of States are also commended for the progress made on their commitment to the Hyogo Framework for Action in each of their respective countries.

The progress achieved so far provides the opportunity for SAARC leaders to build a disaster free South Asia.

We call upon the Heads of States to urgently address the following issues which emerged from national and regional consultations involving participants from government agencies, United Nations agencies, academic institutions and civil society:

1. While appreciating the current Summit's focus on the food crisis and climate change, we urge that the linkages between these and disaster risk reduction be explicitly recognized and reflected in all actions. The SAARC Development Fund must include DRR, and all development activities should be screened to ensure they are increasing disaster resilience of the people. Any infrastructure resourced through the Fund must be disaster proof.
2. SAARC should allocate sufficient and predictable resources to ensure the operationalisation of the Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management and the effective functioning of all the related SAARC regional institutions.
3. The member states must ensure that local government has adequate decision making authority and resources for DRR interventions to strengthen the resilience of people.
4. SAARC regional institutions must be publically accountable and transparent and access to information ensured.
5. Development policies and interventions - within and between neighboring states -financed by bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors must be assessed to ensure that these are not increasing the risk of disasters.
6. SAARC member countries should maximize efforts to ensure DRR measures are linked to, and operationalised at, the community level with the community's participation.
7. Formation of resource pools of people in South Asia - from community, civil society, academia, media and government - with planning expertise to operationalise policies, and to develop practical mainstreaming tools. In line with the object of SAARC disaster management framework skilled teams who can be deployed rapidly in the region during emergencies should be established.
8. The SAARC heads of state adopt regular independent, multi-stakeholder performance audits for national and regional disaster risk reduction activities.
9. To create functional regional information mechanisms to share weather related information across member states, and for member states to invest on multi hazard early warning information generation and dissemination to link to communities.
10. In order to create a disaster free South Asia it is essential SAARC member states recognize the strength, knowledge and experience of communities and their institutions and the larger civil society and promote effective partnerships in policy and practice.

16 July 2008, Colombo

This call for action was developed in the two-day regional conference organized by the Sri Lanka National Disaster Management Coordination Committee, in collaboration with ActionAid, Christian Aid, Oxfam America, Practical Action and Sri Lankan Red Cross. Participants came from government, UN agencies, universities and civil society organizations from SAARC member countries. The conference was closed by the Hon. Mahinda Samarasinghe, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights where he was presented with the call for action.
