

Vital measures to saves lives before disaster strikes

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- Last Updated: October 02. 2009 11:52PM UAE / October 2. 2009 7:52PM GMT



Filipino children receiving the remains of a food handout at a makeshift evacuation centre after severe flooding on the outskirts of Manila. Mike Clarke / AFP

Earthquakes, tsunamis and a typhoon provided four virtually simultaneous disasters in the Asia-Pacific region last week, stretching aid agencies to the limit as emergency response teams were dispatched to the devastated countries in urgent need of help.

Natural disasters are a fact of life and while charities and aid agencies do what they can, experts warn that governments and international bodies must do more to prepare for them and help alleviate the suffering they cause.

Experts are calling for the urgent implementation of better planning measures to cushion the blow of natural catastrophes, urging governments to boost investment in preventative measures, such as urban planning, education and building regulations to reduce death tolls and relieve pressure on aid teams.

“Preventative measures really have to be a priority,” says Brigitte Leoni, a spokeswoman for the UN’s International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

“At the moment people usually respond to these events and prefer to pay for the relief and recovery rather than avoiding the disaster, but if you don’t invest before you are going to spend a lot more after, and the worst thing obviously is that people are going to die.”

Within a week, the Asia Pacific region saw tropical storm Ketsana leave more than 400 dead in the Philippines, before moving on to cause devastation in Vietnam, an earthquake and tsunami caused destruction on the Samoan islands and an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale killed at least 500 in Indonesia.

We are just about coping,” said Paul Conneally, a spokesman for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

“But a situation like this emphasises the importance of investment in prevention and preparation, education, early warning systems and the importance of close co-operation between government, agencies and all partners so humanitarian organisation’s aren’t overwhelmed.”

With experts warning that weather-related disasters are expected to increase, these preventative measures are more important than ever.

The US\$3.15 billion (Dh11.5bn) China spent on flood control between 1960 and 2000 may have averted financial losses of about \$12bn, according to the ISDR. In Bangladesh, early-warning systems and shelters mean that while the 2007 Cyclone Sidr killed 3,400 people, a similar cyclone in 1991 killed 138,000.

The poor drainage systems in the Philippines, clogged with waste due to a lack of proper rubbish disposal, intensified the impact of the storm that hit the country dropping a month’s worth of rain on Manila in just six hours.

Loren Legarda, a Philippine Senator, has said her government needs to introduce more preventative measures to reduce the impact of climate-related disasters in the wake of the floods, and called for a mass cleaning of canals and waterways to reduce vulnerability.

“No doubt there were infrastructural weaknesses before but there is also a lot of infrastructure now which has been washed away, it’s putting them back below the zero point so the international community really needs to work with these governments to help them and support them,” said Mr Conneally, stressing that this assistance must not just focus on recovery, but preventative action to make sure the impact of another hazard will be less severe.

The recent Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, a meeting in Geneva attended by 152 governments and 137 organisations, recommended that 10 per cent of humanitarian relief funds be directed to risk reduction and at least one per cent of all national development funding be reserved for risk prevention measures.

Mr Conneally pointed to the importance of educating and training the communities themselves to respond to disasters. “These communities are not victims waiting passively to be affected by disasters,” he said. “As far as we are concerned are the best placed to respond, they are the first on the ground. We really need to work with communities to give them the tools and capacity to empower them to be able to take a much greater role in disaster preparedness and response.”

The impact of weather-related disasters in poor countries is estimated to be as much 30 per cent more severe than in industrialised nations. The disproportionate impact on poorer countries, and urban communities, can be due to poor urban planning, construction and a lack of educational measures, said Ms Leoni.

“There is a poverty issue, a lot of poor people can be constrained to live in unsafe places because those are the places people don’t want to be and urban planning can be very poor,” she said. “In many countries there are slums or human settlements in dangerous

places, many poor people can't afford to buy land in the best part of the city so they buy land close to slopes and put themselves at risk to mudslides or other things and can be the first ones in the front line. Choosing where to build houses and how you build them are two strong factors that can reduce risk." Preventative measures don't have to be expensive. Cuba is often given an example for cheap yet effective strategies to lessen the impact of hurricanes. Emergency procedures are part of the national curriculum and, when an evacuation is ordered, citizens are asked to go and check their neighbours are aware.

As far as investment in infrastructure is concerned, according to Ms Leoni, schools and hospitals are the priority and should be as resilient as possible, because if people cannot receive treatment it becomes a "double disaster".

"It's very important that at least you have those key structures very safe," she said.

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