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Press Releases

International Day for Disaster Reduction

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Urgent action needed to protect hospitals from natural hazards

THE tragedies that struck the Asia and Pacific region this month underscore the urgent action that must be taken to better protect hospitals from natural disasters. Large-scale human suffering is exacerbated when the very services that are most needed to save lives - hospitals, clinics and other health facilities - are counted among the casualties.

Today, the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction dedicates its annual International Day for Disaster Reduction to the urgent need to make "Hospitals Safe from Disasters." Dozens of hospitals and health facilities each year are themselves impacted by floods, hurricanes, cyclones, earthquakes and other natural hazards because safety measures were not integrated in their design, location or construction.

The "Hospitals Safe from Disasters" theme was also used for the 2008-09 World Disaster Reduction campaign that culminates today. This two-year campaign has been a joint initiative of UNISDR, the World Health Organization and the World Bank aimed at ensuring people's access to functioning health facilities during and after natural hazards. The ISDR system is using today's event to highlight the gains made during the campaign and the work that still needs to be done in making hospitals safer from disasters.

"Since the beginning of the campaign, much has been achieved to make hospitals safer but more investments are still needed to improve the functionality of hospital when disasters occur," says Margareta Wahlström, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction. According to a recent WHO survey, only 50% of all country's health sectors have a budget allocation for risk reduction and emergency preparedness.

Hospitals and health facilities are in the frontline when floods, hurricanes, cyclones, and earthquakes strike and many are adversely impacted because safety measures were not integrated in their design, construction and functionality. There are at least 90 000 hospitals and other health facilities in the world's 49 least-developed countries, many of which are vulnerable to disasters, including those related to the harmful effects of climate change.

"No new hospital should be built unless it can withstand the impact of natural

hazards," Ms Wahlström adds. "Existing health facilities should also be assessed for their safety and action take to improve their safety and the level of their preparedness."

Several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have already assessed the safety of their health facilities and set priorities for making improvements. Mexico has demonstrated that it is possible to make hospitals safer by applying a Hospital Safety Index to more than 1000 of its high-risk facilities. The Hospital Safety Index measures 145 crucial spots in hospitals that will allow their safety classification according to three main levels.

The Hospital Safety Index has now been applied to many facilities in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru and in countries elsewhere in the world, such as Oman, Sudan and Tajikistan. Dubai, within the United Arab Emirates has also committed to assessing half of its hospitals by 2010 and the remainder by the end of 2011. Hundreds of health professionals worldwide have been trained in emergency preparedness.

WHO will continue working with governments to achieve the objectives of the campaign and assure that they remain a priority for governments together with financial institutions, private and non-government organizations, professional bodies, health institutions and workforce, and international agencies.

The campaign has also led to today's launch in London, hosted by the UK Health Protection Agency, of an International Thematic Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction for health, which will facilitate action from international and national partners on reducing deaths, injuries and illness from emergencies, disasters and other crises.

"Preparedness and risk reduction is the way ahead in health and humanitarian action.

By working together, countries and communities can deal with these risks, particularly by reducing vulnerabilities and building capacities to mitigate and respond to all emergencies they may face," said Dr Eric Laroche, WHO's Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises.

The last Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction held in Geneva proposed that by 2011 national assessments of the safety of existing health facilities should be undertaken, and that by 2015 concrete action plans for safer hospitals should be developed and implemented in all disaster prone countries. Hospital safety will remain one of the main elements of the new UNISDR campaign on cities at risk that will be launched next year. *WHO, 14/10/09.*

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vapress@matangitonga.to or fax (676) 24749