

UN Says Preparing for Disasters Can Save Lives

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The United Nations says better preparedness and early-warning systems can save lives and property when natural disasters strike. To mark the International Day for Disaster Reduction, the United Nations urges countries to take the actions needed to lessen the impacts of hazards.



Volunteers help clean up a local residents home covered in mud from landslides brought by Typhoon Morakot in the village of Chishan, in Kaohsiung county, southern Taiwan, 14 Aug 2009

The negative impacts of natural disasters can be seen everywhere. In just the past few weeks, the world has witnessed the destructive power of earthquakes in Indonesia, typhoons in the Philippines and the tsunami that struck Samoa and neighbouring islands.

A study by the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters finds that, between 1980 and 2007, nearly 8,400 natural disasters killed more than two-million people. These catastrophic events caused more than \$1.5 trillion in economic losses.

U.N. Meteorologist Geoffrey Love says that is the bad news.

"Over the last 50 years, economic losses have increased by a factor of 50. That sounds pretty horrendous, but the loss of life has decreased by a factor of 10 simply because we are getting better at warning people. We are making a difference," he said. "Extreme events, however, will continue to occur. But, the message is that they may not be disasters."

Love, who is director of Weather and Disaster Risk Reduction at the World Meteorological Organization, says most of the deaths and economic losses were caused by weather, climate, or water-related extremes. These include droughts, floods, windstorms, tropical cyclones and wildfires.

He says extreme events will continue. But, he says extreme events become disasters only when people fail to prepare for them.

"Many of the remedies are well-known. From a planning perspective, it is pretty simple. Build resilient buildings. Do not build where the hazards will destroy them," said Love. "From an early-warning perspective, make sure the warnings go right down to the community level. Build on community education. Build community action plans."

The World Meteorological Organization points to Cuba and Bangladesh as examples of countries that have successfully reduced the loss of life caused by natural disasters by taking preventive action.

It says tropical cyclones formerly claimed dozens, if not hundreds of lives, each year, in

Cuba. But, the development of an early-warning system, has reversed that trend. In 2008, Cuba was hit by five successive hurricanes, but only seven people were killed.

Bangladesh also has achieved substantial results. Major storm surges in 1970 and 1991 caused the deaths of about 440,000 people. Through careful preparation, the death toll from super Cyclone Sidr in November 2007 was less than 3,500.