

## Triple punch tests disaster preparedness in Asia-Pacific region

**Source:** United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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**NEW YORK, 2 October 2009** – A convergence of severe natural disasters has left millions of people in distress across Asia and the Pacific this week. Since 26 September, a total of six countries have been hit by flooding, a typhoon, a tsunami and earthquakes.

UNICEF's emergency preparations are in full throttle in the region, with death tolls still rising in Indonesia's earthquake zone; more severe tropical storms targeting countries from the Philippines to Viet Nam; and relief efforts continuing in the Samoan Islands.

"These disasters are larger than what the country can respond to," says UNICEF Director of Emergency Programmes Louis-Georges Arsenault, who called the triple punch in the Asia-Pacific region an "extraordinary" event.

### **More rains to come**

In the Philippines, UNICEF emergency teams have been responding to the worst flooding in 40 years, triggered by Tropical Storm Ondoy. Teams are also being deployed to the north of the country in anticipation of a new and even more powerful storm, Parma, which is expected to make landfall this weekend.

With parts of Manila under six feet of water and hundreds of thousands of people in evacuation centres, the Government of the Philippines is breaking with past policy to solicit international aid.

"In the past, they have been reluctant," says Mr. Arsenault, who notes that the country is a model of disaster preparedness. "But this time, they had no hesitation whatsoever," he adds.

The United Nations will issue a joint appeal next week to respond to the crisis in the Philippines. UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes says the amount of the appeal will be in the "tens of millions of dollars."

Meanwhile, the Philippines and its neighbours – including Viet Nam, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Cambodia – are bracing for Tropical Storm Parma, which meteorologists are calling a 'super-typhoon'.

## **Quakes in Indonesia**

UNICEF is also working to deliver relief for children and families affected by two successive earthquakes in Western Sumatra, Indonesia. The first, a 7.6-magnitude temblor, hit on 30 September; it was followed within 24 hours by a second, slightly smaller quake.

Hundreds are already confirmed dead in the affected areas. That number is expected to rise sharply as bodies trapped in the rubble are removed. Mr. Holmes suggested the death toll could surpass that of the 2006 quake in Central Java, which killed more than 5,000.

In addition, tens of thousands have been displaced. The Indonesian Government, like its counterpart in the Philippines, has issued a request for international aid.

UNICEF is providing emergency supplies for 50,000 families in Western Sumatra, and UNICEF Representative in Indonesia Angela Kearney plans to visit the quake zone over the weekend.

## **Tsunami in Samoa and Tonga**

Separately this week, an earthquake in the South Pacific caused a series of tsunamis that swept coastal villages in the Samoan Islands.

Though the population of these islands is relatively small, children in Samoa and Tonga are at risk of respiratory disease, measles and tetanus, as vaccination rates in many communities are low. On some islands, all medical facilities have been lost along with water supplies.

In response to the crisis, UNICEF will coordinate an effort to provide safe water and adequate sanitation for tsunami-affected areas of Samoa and Tonga.

## **Improved preparedness**

UNICEF acknowledges government efforts to improve emergency preparedness in all of the affected countries, especially in the wake of the 2004 tsunami and other disasters. But no amount of preparedness can prevent such disasters from happening.

Meeting the immediate food, water and shelter needs of millions of people simultaneously exceeds the preparedness capabilities of these countries. Therefore, it is crucial that the world community redouble efforts to support the Governments of Indonesia and the Philippines, in particular.

"They will need international support. These are very strong human catastrophes we have to deal with," says Mr. Arsenault.