

SYRIA: Government upgrades disaster management

DAMASCUS, 23 May, 2005 (Source IRIN) - Syrian officials recently took part in a workshop to improve the national response to natural disasters in the country. The capital, Damascus, is located on the Dead Sea fault line system in the west of the country, which is a seismically active area experiencing frequent minor tremors.

After the devastation caused by the Bam earthquake in nearby Iran in December 2003 and the seismic activity which caused the catastrophic Asian Tsunami last December, the Syrian authorities felt they needed to take action.

The director of systems and plans at the Syrian ministry of local administration and environment (MoLAE), engineer Erfan Ali, spoke to IRIN in Damascus and pointed out that 80 earthquakes ranging between 0.6 and 5.4 on the Richter scale were registered there between February 2004 and March 2005.

He said that Syria needed to make preparations for a more serious earthquake.

"All governorates suffer from a huge lack of equipment to find people trapped alive and also heavy machinery to lift the rubble," he said.

A two-day workshop organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on disaster management training was held in the capital between 18 and 19 May.

This was the first such event of its kind to be held in Syria to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the government, respective UN agencies, NGOs and other participants in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

"The major natural hazards affecting Syria are earthquakes, fires and floods. The capacity to deal with these risks in the country is still at a fairly low level," the Syrian engineer said.

"This workshop addressed the need to engage in a dialogue with the government and NGOs on disaster risk management in Syria. However, the government is already very response focused," Petra Demarin, of the UNDP's Disaster Management Training Programme (DMTP) told IRIN in Damascus following the event.

During the workshop, Ali gave a comprehensive overview identifying areas where the government sees potential crises.

"There are serious vulnerabilities in slums which usually have high population density such as the case in Damascus, where there are 800 people living per hectare. Some 800,000 people are living in these informal settlements which were built in high frequency buffer zones and along the Damascus fault line," Ali said, pointing out that the government was currently looking into resolving the problem.

However, a number of poorly-constructed buildings have collapsed over the past few years, with the most tragic incident in 2002 when a block of informal multi storey settlements in the capital fell down, killing 52 people and displacing 13 families. Some 2,000 people living in the same area could face the same fate were there to be a major earthquake.

Fire-fighting equipment was another area of concern.

"According to international standards, one fire engine should be dedicated to every 25,000 persons. Damascus is the only governorate that meets this. Most governorates lack fire-fighting equipment. For example, Raqqa governorate, 547 km northeast of the capital, lacks 75 percent of such equipment," he said. The government is trying to ensure there is at least one fire engine available per 50,000 people throughout Syria.

However, Ali said training and rehabilitation was very advanced in the country. He said a large number of drills were being carried out throughout governorates in preparedness for different scenarios such as a building collapse, an oil leak or an explosion.

"The workshop was a success because of the participants' enthusiasm and the positive and encouraging atmosphere, and in bringing together the UN country team, the Syrian government, and the Red Crescent organisation," OCHA's Jamie McGoldrick, told IRIN. "It has enabled the participants to compare the similarities and dissimilarities; we have a better understanding of our potential strength and our potential areas for good cooperation and integration," he added.

The UN in Syria has launched a new project to support the drawing up of a national strategy for disaster risk management.

"The strategy will emphasise the integration of disaster management considerations into development issues in the country, facilitate stakeholder participation in this effort, as well as raising the awareness of policy makers and civil society regarding appropriate actions for reducing disaster risk," UN Resident Coordinator in Syria, Ali Al-Za'tari told IRIN.

For more information:

Disaster Management Training Programme - <http://www.undmtp.org/>