

Caribbean not fully prepared for hurricanes

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ASSESSMENTS carried out in the Caribbean after last year's series of hurricanes have found shortcomings in the disaster preparedness and emergency response efforts by some states that were hard hit during the period that was considered to be the most active in history.

Among the areas found wanting were disaster shelters, early warning systems and the cooperation between the public and disaster management agencies.

It was also revealed that "government weaknesses" exacerbated the overall impact of natural disasters, particularly in the Eastern Caribbean.

The findings were highlighted at Tuesday's opening session of a two-day United Nations Development Programme/Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (UNDP/CDERA) regional workshop on improving response to natural disasters, held at the Jamaica Pegasus Hotel in Kingston.

According to Erik Blommestein of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), poverty was a major contributor to the severe impact of the hurricanes, as witnessed in Haiti, while poor building techniques were evident in countries such as Grenada and the Cayman Islands which suffered massive losses last year.

He said proper disaster shelters in other countries such as Jamaica were lacking.

"Strategy for intra-regional cooperation should go beyond the phase that reacts (to disasters)," he said.

"(The region needs) a comprehensive disaster management policy, including the provisions of economic instruments and risk reduction, strategies, hazard mapping and storage of emergency supplies," added Blommestein.

During the 2004 hurricane season, the region experienced 14 weather systems - seven hurricanes, five storms and two tropical depressions - which resulted in 49 lives being lost and approximately US\$5 billion in losses and damage. The overall economic impact, however, amounted to US\$3.4 billion.

On Tuesday another ECLAC representative, Ricardo Zapata, raised concerns that international agencies were quicker to make donations after a disaster rather than assisting in implementing the necessary structures to reduce the impact.

He also said regional countries lack the necessary baseline data to analyse the impact of disasters and environmental inventories.

Meanwhile, Cletus Springer of CDERA highlighted several deficiencies in the region's early warning systems. He said meteorological services need to pay equal attention to climate-related phenomena as they do to weather. He also suggested that early warning systems need to be more clearly defined and give better information regarding risks.

According to Springer, regional countries also lacked strong cooperation between the public and disaster management agencies and he suggested that more emphasis be paid to hazard management.

The two-day workshop brought together dozens of emergency response professionals throughout the Caribbean to examine preparedness and response to natural hazards and disasters.

Head of CDERA Jeremy Collymore said the socio-economic impact of last year's hurricanes "left a large footprint of dislocation and need on our physical and economic landscape.

"Let us collectively make sure that post-2004 disaster management in the Caribbean is improved because of our commitment to learning and sharing," he said.

Environment minister Dean Peart, who also addressed the opening of the workshop, said too that better infrastructure could reduce the impact of hurricanes.