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UN Resident Coordinator Fredrick Lyons said in Tehran on Tuesday that Iran reported the highest number of deaths from earthquakes during 1980-2000.

Addressing the inaugural session of a seminar entitled 'Policies and Practices for Seismic Risk Management in Urban Areas', he said that in terms of the average number of people killed per million inhabitants per year, Iran ranks second in the world.

"Nearly a year ago, we were all deeply shaken by the Bam earthquake," he said, stressing that "beyond the terrible toll in lives and suffering the earthquake reminded us of the need for greater emphasis on earthquake risk management."

The seminar, organized jointly by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction and UNDP with the support of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, brings together experts and decision-makers from some of the most earthquake-prone countries of the world, he added.

The severity of the impact of the Bam earthquake can be gauged by the fact that 60 percent of all deaths from natural disasters worldwide in 2003 were from this single event, he said, adding that the quake killed some 30,000 people, left more than 26,000 people injured and rendered more than 75,000 homeless.

The 2,500 year-old historic citadel of Bam (Arg-e Bam), an internationally acclaimed heritage site, sustained severe damage, he said, stressing that the economic prospects of the Bam region and the livelihoods of its people were dealt a severe blow.

Expressing his concern over the persistent earthquake risk in Iran, Lyons said that on average one earthquake with a magnitude of four on the Richter scale occurs every month in Iran.

Every year one earthquake with a magnitude of six occurs and every 10 years one earthquake with a magnitude of seven or above occurs in the country.

The UN official further underlined the need to take measures to ensure that people live better and safer lives in the future.

"We need to look ahead and explore what can be done to prevent the recurrence of further Bams in other parts of Iran and the world," he added.

Referring to Iran's significant technical expertise in almost all aspects of earthquake risk management, he expressed his regret that this wide range of technical expertise and knowhow has not yet translated into tangible action for disaster risk reduction on a large scale.

"We need to ask what needs to be done to apply all this knowledge and experience to reduce the impact of future earthquakes."

He further stressed that disaster risk management at the local level was a key element in any viable national strategy to reduce disasters risks, building on the quality of community networks, the social fabric and effective local governance.

"We now know from the experience of the past 20 years that strengthening 'stand alone' emergency management institutions, often with external assistance, does not work. There is a need for institutional arrangements that link public, private, and civil society sectors and build vertical ties between local, district, national and global scale actors.

"Local communities need to be the focus of a large part of our public awareness raising and capacity building efforts," Lyons stressed in his speech.

He was optimistic that the seminar would provide the opportunity for grappling with the many existing challenges and provide tangible directions for future action not only in Iran but also in other earthquake-prone countries.

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