

BusinessWorld April 29, 2005, Friday

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BusinessWorld

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SECTION: Pg. S3/8

LENGTH: 674 words

HEADLINE: WEEKENDER: ENVIRONMENT;  
When disaster strikes: assessment on preparedness

BODY:

The December 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean have heightened awareness that poor people and countries are especially vulnerable to the consequences of natural disasters. Can we do better, from the community level to the global level, at mitigating the worst effects of natural disasters on the lives and livelihoods of the poor?

The scale of loss from the December 26 tsunami is by now sadly familiar to most people: More than 200,000 people perished, and over 1.5 million were left homeless.

Economic losses have been estimated at more than \$6 billion, and the destruction of infrastructure, fishing fleets, and industry means that economic recovery will take years. In short, the tsunami ranks as one of the worst natural disasters in modern history.

Tragically, the enormous loss of life and property may have been at least partly avoidable. If the tsunami had taken place on the coast of Japan instead of in the Indian Ocean, it would have swept ashore to a population and a physical environment well prepared for the onslaught of water.

The country's tsunami warning system aims to give citizens at least 10 minutes to evacuate the area in the path of a tsunami, and an extensive array of tsunami walls, shelters, and floodgates helps protect the shoreline. But none of these were present around the Indian Ocean.

The tsunami illustrates the pattern that natural disasters increasingly display: poor countries and people bear the brunt of the devastation. Natural disasters occur when a natural hazard (such as an earthquake, cyclone, or drought) intersects with human vulnerability (such as poor building standards, inappropriate land use, or lack of knowledge about and preparation for the hazard). And the poor remain highly vulnerable.

Over the past 80 years, whereas the number of recorded natural disasters has increased, the number of fatalities has decreased, so the world has made some progress on reducing the impact of disasters. Still, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), from 1980 to 2000 about 1.5 million people died in earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tropical storms, droughts, and other natural disasters. Death rates are far higher in poor countries than in rich ones.

Although only 11% of the people exposed to natural hazards live in poor countries, these people account for more than 53% of deaths recorded from natural disasters.

The differences in impact suggest that there is great potential to reduce the devastation caused by natural disasters in developing countries - that, in fact, the key ingredient in these tragedies is human inaction.

"There is nothing natural about these disasters," said Andrew Maskrey, chief of the UNDP's disaster reduction unit. "The impact of disasters can be sharply reduced if governments make an effort to reduce risk before a disaster happens, rather than rush to

respond after the damage has been done."

#### PREPARING FOR THE WORST

There is increasing recognition that disaster preparedness at the international, national, and local levels is key to reducing the destructiveness of natural disasters.

In the wake of the tsunami disaster, plans are afoot to create an international tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean, using buoys, seismic stations, and satellites.

Such a system has the potential to save hundreds of thousands of lives, but it will be of little use if local people, many of whom have no access to modern communications, do not get the warning or do not know what to do when they do get it.


To be effective, the early warning system will need to be accompanied by education and public awareness campaigns as well as communications infrastructure.

"You need to know who has authority to make decisions, you need emergency radio procedures, and you need evacuation routes," said William Orme, a spokesman for UNDP.

Bangladesh, which has been called the most disaster-prone country in the world, has shown that even a poor country can effectively prepare for disaster.

To be continued

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