

November 25, 2011 12:00 am

## Comment: Why disaster risk management must be given top priority

By Ban Ki-moon

In a world where change is a given, including changes to our climate, the adage to “listen to the voice of experience” may seem old fashioned. But there is nothing quaint about advice when it is a matter of surviving – and thriving – on a warming planet.

I listened to the voices of experience while in Bangladesh recently for the Climate Vulnerable Forum. I heard from leaders whose countries are on the front lines of climate impacts. I came away convinced that some of the countries hardest hit by human-induced climate change have much to teach the rest of us. They know from experience about reducing risks and forging a safer, cleaner, greener path to prosperity.

Consider Bangladesh, the host of this year’s forum. Through painful experience, the country has now become a world leader in disaster preparedness. In 1991, a cyclone in Bangladesh killed more than 140,000 people. In 2007, when Cyclone Sidr struck, some 40,000 volunteers with bullhorns and bicycles helped move more than 3m people out of harm’s way. Tens of thousands of lives were saved.

Thanks to strong adaptation and preparedness measures, the death toll from comparable disasters today is much lower in Bangladesh than it was 20 years ago. The lesson is clear: natural hazards need not cause a human catastrophe. There are numerous, cost-effective measures that communities and countries can take today to reduce the impact of the increasingly extreme weather events we anticipate in the future.

This is one of the key messages of a special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation* provides expert guidance for governments to strengthen their climate resilience.

According to the IPCC, since 1970, 95 per cent of lives lost from natural disasters – both climate-related and other events such as earthquakes – have been in developing countries. As climate impacts unfold in the coming decades, preventive measures, including strong disaster risk reduction and adaptation policies, will be essential.

Economic losses from disasters already regularly surpass \$100bn a year, and are set to increase significantly in the years to come. By the end of this century, the annual increase

in damage from changed tropical cyclone activity alone is estimated to be between \$28bn and \$68bn.

There are other factors at play, beyond climate change. Age, wealth, education and gender also play a role in increasing vulnerability. Rapid urbanisation and population growth mean more people are now at risk. Mega-cities built on seismic areas or exposed coastlines are particularly vulnerable. In cities such as Mumbai, Cairo and Lagos, decaying infrastructure, land erosion, crowded conditions and insufficient rescue services could spell potential calamity should a substantial earthquake or series of storms hit.

To ignore these threats is gambling with our future. Members of the Climate Vulnerable Forum know this from experience. That is why they are giving disaster risk management top priority.

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Adaptation must be a top priority for the entire world. Climate impacts will be with us for decades to come as a result of emissions released today. Developing countries need significantly scaled-up resources and technology to adapt. This is a smart investment in a safer, more stable, prosperous world.

But our capacity to adapt is limited, and is only viable in the context of effective mitigation. At the climate negotiations in Durban, I expect governments to use common sense and compromise to find a way forward for the Kyoto Protocol so we can make a comprehensive, global climate change agreement possible in the future.

We have no time to spare. The IPCC has called for global greenhouse gas emissions to peak within this decade. Yet carbon emissions in 2010 were the highest in history. The International Energy Agency says we are close to a point of no return for staying under a 2C temperature rise. Anything beyond will condemn future generations to dangerous climate change.

Here again, I say we should listen to the voices of the vulnerable. Several of the most vulnerable countries now serve as some of the best models for a clean energy sustainable future. Costa Rica, Ethiopia, the Maldives and Samoa plan to go carbon neutral. Bangladesh is also pursuing a low-carbon path.

I commend these efforts. Every country must do more, starting with those that bear greatest responsibility. We need progress both in the negotiations and on the ground. Let the commitment of some of the most vulnerable countries to pursue a green pathway be an inspiration to more developed countries – the big emitters. We must work together to build a safer, healthier, more climate-resilient world. Together, we can build the future we want.

*The writer is secretary-general of the United Nations*

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