Statement

by

Mr. Anwarul K. Chowdhury

United Nations Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and the Small Island Developing States

at the

Second World Conference on Disaster Reduction

Kobe, Hyogo, Japan
19 January 2005

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
My dear colleague Under-Secretary-General Jan Egeland,
Secretary-General of the Conference Salvano Briceno
Distinguished delegates,

I take the floor at the Second World Conference on Disaster Reduction being held here in this pleasant city of Kobe in my capacity as the Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). In the work of my Office, the United Nations advocates for the cause of the most vulnerable countries of the world and makes every effort to put their concerns high on the global agenda.

We meet here at a time when the humanity is still reeling from the recent catastrophic tsunami disaster. This week also reminds us of the Kobe earthquake ten years ago. With this coincidental but very relevant backdrop, I also bring with me the outcome of the landmark international gathering that concluded only last Friday (14 January) in Mauritius, as its Secretary-General. The five-day high-level conference adopted the Declaration of Mauritius and the Mauritius Strategy for the further implementation of the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action for the Small Island Developing Countries, highlighting the international community's resolve and commitment to support the efforts of small island developing countries in their development efforts and in building the much-needed resilience to overcome their vulnerabilities.

With a large and engaged participation of the member-states, civil society and partner organisations, this UN conference reaffirmed that the SIDS continue to be a special case for sustainable development and recognised the need to develop and strengthen effective disaster risk reduction, early warning systems, emergency relief, and rehabilitation and reconstruction capacities for these countries. Echoing the central message of this conference on disaster reduction, the International Meeting in Mauritius called for particular attention to support the efforts of SIDS through technology development, capacity-building and human resources development to build resilience in these countries.

The Mauritius event being the first major international meeting in 2005 and following the Indian Ocean tsunami, the participants deliberated on the disproportionately high economic, social and environmental impact of natural disasters on small islands and sought the opportunity to be provided by the Kobe conference to bring into focus the specific concerns of these countries on issues relating to disaster reduction. The Barbados Programme ranks the need to address natural and environment disasters as one of its 14 priorities. It explicitly called on the 1994 Yokohama World Conference on Natural

Disasters to give special recognition to SIDS so that their unique characteristics are taken into account in developing natural disaster reduction management programmes.

I need not stress that the vulnerability of SIDS becomes exceedingly high as they are particularly exposed to persistent natural disasters --- hurricanes, cyclones, storms, floods and of course, tsunamis. It is much more difficult for such small developing states, many of which are geographically far-flung and isolated, and lack the resources and knowhow, to effectively deal with such disasters. Added to these are problems of climate change, global warming and the consequences of sea-level rise. Because of these issues, one of the critical themes of the Mauritius International Meeting was on building resilience to withstand natural, as well as other environmental, economical and man-made disasters, that repeatedly and adversely impact on the lives of people in the SIDS. As the experience of last decade has shown, the vulnerabilities of the SIDS continue to increase and will continue to generate disasters in one form or other. There is obviously the need to take timely, more deliberate, systematic and concerted action to reduce disaster risks in the coming years.

As we prepare the Kobe Framework for Action 2005-2015, we need to remind ourselves of the continuing validity of the assertion made in the Yokohama Strategy that " --- the most affected by natural and other disasters are the poor and specially disadvantaged groups in developing countries as they are least equipped to cope with them." This situation is most graphically discernible amongst the population of the Least Developed Countries. Like the SIDS, the 50 LDCs of the world suffer the worst consequences of disasters and their valiant development efforts experience recurring setbacks. The Brussels Programme of Action for these countries that was adopted by the UN in 2001 underscores the critical importance of disaster reduction and preparedness for the LDCs. The Yokohama document called for giving " priority attention to the Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries in the activities of the International Decade for Disaster Reduction." As the Brussels document came out subsequently, it is necessary that the Kobe outcome gets updated and links up with the ongoing Programme of Action for LDCs, in the same manner it would be reflecting the just-adopted Mauritius Strategy for SIDS. It is also necessary that international community gives these most vulnerable countries topmost priority in terms of assistance for building their resilience to disasters.

A major outcome of the Mauritius Meeting is its support to the establishment and effective strengthening of early warning systems. In his statement at that forum Secretary-General Kofi Annan has called for a global early warning system to monitor all kinds of natural disasters. Following the recent tsunami, a number of ideas and initiatives have been presented for instituting early warning. It would be appropriate and cost-effective to bring all these together to fit efficiently in a global system that would of immense benefit particularly to the most vulnerable countries. Seeing the matter from the vantage point of these nations, I believe it would be good if the Kobe document could reflect this. Also relevant in this context is the emphasis given by Jan Egeland that early warning systems need to be people-centred targeting vulnerable communities.

Yesterday in his address before this conference Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan announced his government's decision to launch the "Initiative for Disaster Reduction through ODA" to ensure the inclusion of disaster reduction perspectives in the provision of development assistance. This initiative is commendable and deserves to be welcomed by us. I would also urge that the primary focus of this effort should appropriately be the most vulnerable countries.

In conclusion, allow me to reiterate that disaster risk reduction requires an aggressive and pro-active approach to informing, motivating and involving people in all aspects of disaster reduction in their own community. As has been emphasized, disaster reduction and mitigation efforts should be part of a community's overall development. It is therefore crucial that all disaster-afflicted countries incorporate disaster risk reduction measures specifically in their national development and poverty reduction strategies. We need to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels. Let me also underscore that disaster reduction and prevention efforts are too important and too vital for the vulnerable countries to be left solely to the governments and international organisations alone. To be successful, those must also engage civil society, the private sector and the media.

The black cloud of the disastrous tsunami may turn out to have a silver lining if it stimulates effective, decisive and forward-looking actions for inclusion in the Kobe Framework for Action for the current decade.

****