



"From Thoughts to Action"

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3rd International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010

PRESS RELEASE

Davos, Switzerland – Global risk experts meeting here in the Swiss Alps – some 800 of them attending the biannual International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010 – may be excused for the gloom-and-doom nature of this event.

By its nature, the IDRC deals with sombre topics – earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, fire, floods, drought, famine, and now a catastrophic oil well leak in the Gulf of Mexico.

"It's easy to feel a sense of despair and hopelessness today," Paris-based panellist Badaoui Rouhban told fellow experts." One wonders if the so-called 'disaster community' is up to the job."

The French engineer heads the UNESCO Section for Disaster Reduction, so he has played a central role in devising responses to both natural and man-made catastrophes for most of his career as a risk manager.

Reviewing his expert role over the past 25 years, Rouhban told the Global Risk Forum (GRF) that – despite all the tragic news – his profession has become far abler. It now enjoys great advances in devising "early warning" technology. The Pacific Ocean, for instance, now benefits from use of this network.

"We've been able to learn a lot of lessons," he told his audience. But obviously much remains beyond the grasp of technocrats, and part of it owes to global politics.

In 1992, for instance, Rouhban's UNESCO office saw the potential of the Pacific shield against tsunamis and urged that a similar network be set up for nations in the Indian Ocean region. It didn't happen.

"There was no [follow-up] initiative," the UN official explained. And he wondered out loud how many of the 200,000 lives lost in the 2004 tsunami due to lack of a coordinated early-warning system might have been saved.

“We need to change our 20th-century mindset,” Rouhban insists, “and we’re actually doing that. We know we can’t reduce disasters, but we can reduce the risks. We’re becoming more mature about our goals.”

The speaker urges experts in his “disaster community” to compile what he calls an “anatomy” of such catastrophes. But the approach will require purposeful follow-up.

“We do a lot on know-how and planning,” he says, “but how much do we spend on action?”

Another panel expert, Dr. William Sabandar, serves as the special envoy of ASEAN secretary general for post-Cyclone Nargis recovery in Myanmar. He told risk specialists that much has been achieved there and in Indonesia’s devastated Aceh province. Such post-disaster relief falls under Rouhban’s call for “action”.

According to Sabandar, the Aceh recovery effort has brought notable results:

- construction of 134,000 houses;
- 3,600 km of roads and bridges
- 14,000 steel buildings

Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar forced housing 1 million people in tent settlements, but Sabandar says the BRR Integrity Pact set up under ASEAN has helped create “a one-stop shop for rehabilitation and reconstruction”.

Rouhban’s long-time colleague in the USA, consultant Walter Hays, an expert for earthquake engineering, admits that the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has the “disaster community” feeling especially downcast. Engineers like himself feel especially baffled by the failure of all efforts to cap the well to date.

Even so, Hays told the risk specialists not to think they had become useless.

“You’re part of the answer,” he insisted. “We can’t leave you out of the operation. Don’t forget it.”

Lyn Shepard, Conference Journalist

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