

2<sup>nd</sup> Asian Ministerial Conference  
on Disaster Risk Reduction  
[7 November 2007]

Prime Minister's Speech

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here at this very important conference which is deliberating on a subject of immense relevance to the entire Asian region. I also hope that this conference will be yet another milestone in strengthening cooperative relations among the nations of the region.

Disasters know no political boundaries and we are all equally vulnerable to them. I firmly believe that this is one area where nations can – and must – cooperate to find collective solutions to the challenges in front of them. After all, it is in difficult times that we need the best of relations. As the wise saying goes – *a friend in need, is a friend indeed.*

It is, therefore, heartening to note that in recent years, countries of our region have come together to help one another during times of natural disasters. We have had joint efforts to provide rescue and relief to those in distress – in the aftermath of the tsunami of 2004, after the recent earthquakes in our region, including in Jammu & Kashmir. This conference is taking place at a time when we can all feel hopeful that we have the sagacity to cooperate during times of natural disasters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Asian Ministerial Conference is a natural platform to discuss disaster risk reduction. What is done – or not done – in one country, can have repercussions in another. This conference, therefore, can be a platform for us to learn to work together in the best interests of all our peoples.

Earthquakes, cyclones and floods and tsunami have contributed to disasters across Asia in the recent past. In handling all these disasters, what is important is to have coherent national strategies and national capabilities to handle disasters. This would be in the realms of both disaster prevention and disaster management. I believe that it is incumbent on each one of us to develop the necessary national capabilities. There can be no substitute for this.

At the same time, each of the past episodes has shown us that a national response alone is not adequate. While we have the necessary wherewithal in the region to respond to disasters, we need more bilateral and regional cooperation to make effective use of our capabilities.

Greater cooperation in relief and rehabilitation, cooperation in disaster preparedness and in setting up and maintaining early warning systems is a useful and a good way of demonstrating good neighbourliness. The regional effort in creating a Tsunami Early Warning System is a good example of regional cooperation. I hope we can sustain this effort and replicate it in other areas of disaster management.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The focus of this conference need not be limited to natural disasters alone. Modern societies must also prepare to come together to deal with manmade disasters – be they industrial disasters or disasters caused by terror attacks. The threat of terrorism looms large in our region and could trigger disasters across borders. We must also learn to deal with new kinds of health disasters such as Avian Flu which have emerged as new challenges. They have enormous social and economic consequences. Here again, we need improved methodologies for risk reduction, insurance and mitigation.

And of course, the biggest disaster that we may yet prevent from happening is the catastrophic effect of global warming and climate change. Whereas we have only nature to blame for natural disasters, we cannot say the same for manmade ones. And the actions of one nation can affect many other nations. I hope our region shows the same wisdom and cooperative spirit in dealing with manmade disasters as it has in dealing with natural disasters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

India has adopted a forward-looking approach to disaster management and mitigation. We have constituted a National Disaster Management Authority and State Level Disaster Management Authorities. The National Authority has come forward with a new approach to disaster management. The paradigm shift that they have advocated is based on moving away from a relief-centric, post event approach to a holistic, integrated and preventive approach. The focus will be on disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation.

Improved coordination between various agencies of the Government is a first step in the new approach. Greater awareness in civil society with regard to prevention, mitigation and preparedness, is the next step. Lack of information, panic and uncoordinated response can have a negative impact. Community-based approaches can help deal with panic, rumour-mongering and immediate relief. In risk reduction, such an approach can have positive externalities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is yet another popular saying that has relevance to risk reduction, namely - *a stitch in time, saves nine!* Disaster risk reduction, in particular, should be based on pro-active pre-emptive action. Typically, small investments in improving the safety of houses can go a long way in reducing the risk of damage to life and property during earthquakes. Studies carried out by our engineers show that we could have saved valuable lives and property if we had appropriate housing technology in earthquake-prone areas. We are developing such technologies that are affordable and appropriate. Information sharing in such technologies will be a useful way of addressing the challenge of risk reduction.

A second type of intervention relates to insurance against risk. The penetration of insurance in many of our countries is still very limited. I urge our financial system to be even more pro-active in insuring the risk-prone regions. Insurance against natural disasters is still very limited. Here again, we need an approach that can spread the costs and ensure the financial sustainability of risk insurance.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Countries of our region should learn to work together on a wide variety of fronts. The people of Asia have interacted with each other for centuries and they must do so on this vital subject. I hope opportunities like these will help forge a new unity among the people of Asia. I wish your conference all success in addressing the challenges we face. I hope you will come forward with new approaches for addressing the enduring problems of our people.

Thank you.

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