

NEWSMAKER: UN disaster expert knows first-hand what Copenhagen failure could entail



Margareta Wahlström, Assistant Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction

20 November 2009 – Among those keeping a close eye on the outcome of next month's climate summit in Copenhagen is the head of the United Nations body dealing with disaster risk reduction, who has seen first-hand the devastation wrought by increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters aggravated by climate change.

"Those of us that have worked with disasters for a long time have already seen these extremes developing," Margareta Wahlström, head of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), said in an interview with the UN News Centre as part of its **Newsmaker** profile series.

According to the latest assessment report of the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), weather-related natural hazards such as storms, high rainfalls, floods, droughts and heat waves are expected to be more frequent and severe due to climate change.

"We can expect more extreme weather events, more water and more drought situations," said Ms. Wahlström, a Swedish national with over 25 years of experience in disaster management, development and humanitarian issues, and served as UN Special Coordinator for assistance to communities affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

The Geneva-based ISDR deems disaster risk reduction as crucial to adapting to the changing climate, noting that disaster risk reduction and adaptation to climate change share the same ultimate goal of reducing vulnerability to weather and climate hazards.

"When you begin to look at how to adapt and adjust to the changing climate, risk reduction is the tried and tested methodology which is already well known," Ms. Wahlström stated.

She cited Bangladesh and Cuba as example of countries that have worked hard to reduce their risks to cyclones and hurricanes, and that have, as a result, minimized the loss of life and destruction wrought by such disasters.

On the other hand, Hurricane Katrina, which battered the southern coast of the United States in 2005, and the earthquake that struck Kobe, Japan, in 1995, highlight how even wealthy, developed nations can do more to reduce risks and make their countries and citizens safer.

International negotiations on a new agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are set to conclude in the Danish capital, where countries will meet from 7 to 18 December. With only 16 days left, core political issues remain unresolved, casting doubts on the possibility of achieving a legally binding agreement to combat global warming.

“What I really hope comes out of Copenhagen, whether we have a legally binding agreement or not, is a determined sense by world leaders that they have to continue to pursue practical action and to provide strong support for the collaboration that is required to move forward.

“And, above all, not to let up until they have hopefully within a very short time frame a legally binding agreement,” stated Ms. Wahlström.

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