

**ANEXO 5**  
**Welcome Address**  
**For the**  
**IDNDR-Hemispheric Meeting for the Americas:**  
**Towards Effective Disaster Reduction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**  
**San Jose, Costa Rica 31 May to 2 June, 1999**

Delivered by Mr. Philippe Boulle, Director, IDNDR Secretariat

It is my pleasure to be here today for the official opening of the IDNDR-Hemispheric Meeting for the Americas: Towards Effective Disaster Reduction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. There are few regions of the world that have taken to heart so broadly, the theme of the Decade. I am privileged to be able to present this opening message on behalf of the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Sergio-Vieira de Mello, and speaking in my own capacity as the Director for the Secretariat of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR).

I wish at the onset to thank our host, the Government of Costa Rica for having agreed that this meeting should take place in San Jose. I would also like to recognize and express thanks to the strong leadership of the Organizing Committee which in addition to IDNDR, includes Costa Rica's National Emergency Commission (CNE), the Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO). My most sincere thanks also go to our many close allies and co-sponsors.<sup>1</sup>

This meeting will consider the important aspects that will contribute to disaster prevention and risk management in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as a basis to plan for a safer world in the future. It is an opportunity to assess the accomplishments of disaster reduction in the Americas during the past nine years of the international programme of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, adopted by all member states of the United Nations in 1989. Most importantly, it will enable us to benefit from your collective experience in charting for the next century the direction and means for sustained disaster prevention.

Similar meetings have been held by IDNDR in other regions of the world during the past two years, such as the recently concluded Regional Meeting for Africa and similar meetings in Asia, in the CIS countries, and in the Mediterranean region. This meeting in the Americas, in fact, is the last event of the regional fora and represents, as it were, the 'closing of the loop.' Thus far, all meetings have produced action plans for the regions concerned that especially call for continuation of a concrete international approach to disaster reduction in the next century, on the

basis of strong and achievable programmes for prevention. All the meetings have also emphasized a strong central point of advocacy and coordination within the international community to continue in the 21<sup>st</sup>. century the role now played by IDNDR. I expect this meeting will be no exception and will also produce similar results. All the regional meetings lead towards the global IDNDR Programme Forum to be held in early July 1999 in Geneva and to be opened by the Secretary General of the United Nations. As you know, the Forum will have as its objective to define the disaster reduction programme that the international community will adopt for the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot stop the forces of nature, but we can prevent them from becoming social and economic disasters. Appropriate human behavior and proper use of scientific and technical knowledge can help reduce human vulnerability to natural hazards and contribute to the protection of societal resources and economic assets. We must increase our efforts to develop long term effective preventive strategies. We must also have the determination to make the required public policy decisions that will lead to the economic and social investment necessary to develop and sustain a culture of prevention.

Rapid growth brings with it increasing complexity, more extensive systems of infrastructure, denser populations, and excessive demands on the immediate environment and essential natural resources. A desire to provide greater social and economic well being for people can easily bring unacceptable risks to the environment. Against these conditions of increased vulnerability, we have seen the global effects of recent natural hazards, such as those related to the El Niño climatic variation in 1997-1998 or, more recently, hurricane Mitch. Hazards today do not respect national frontiers. Floods and hurricanes, for example, frequently affect more than a single country, thereby underlying a necessity of a regional approach to disaster reduction.

Indeed, today, natural disasters can no longer be considered as individual or isolated emergency events, to be addressed only after they occur in terms of short-term relief measures. In any case, we can no longer afford financially or socially to compensate adequately for human and material losses due to disasters. Rather, we now have the opportunity, by working together through essential partnerships, to realize the benefits of multi-disciplinary approaches to anticipate natural, environmental and even technological hazards. For the future it is absolutely essential that scientific and technical knowledge become integrated into the decision-making process, which leads to public policies for sustained disaster prevention. There is no doubt that disaster reduction will always require politically demanding choices. But making these choices will help protect our most important assets.

As we approach the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, further steps must be taken to make disaster reduction a public value. This will require a greater public understanding of the feasibility of disaster prevention, to be achieved through ongoing public information and education from one generation to another. Never before have we had so many efficient means to communicate our knowledge and share our experiences for the benefit of human kind. What we are witnessing now is nothing less than an emerging community of interests based on collaborative endeavor and new forms of organizational relationship.

Ladies and gentlemen with this in mind we must therefore look not towards the closing of a decade, but towards the beginning of a new period of sustained and effective disaster reduction through renewed and strengthened partnerships. Successor arrangements to the IDNDR will be put into place on the basis of the proposals of the Secretary General of the United Nations to Member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This will ensure continuity in the efforts and achievements of the IDNDR National Committees and other framework partners.

But a more important element is still lacking: the directions and programs to be followed internationally and regionally.

I therefore look forward with great interest to the conclusions of this meeting, because they must be the conclusions of a regional agenda for the Americas for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an agenda that will form an essential part of the overall disaster reduction programme to be adopted at the IDNDR Programme Forum in July.

I applaud the interest that has brought you all here to discuss this important global issue and trust that the meeting, with such an important attendance, will be very fruitful and successful.