

World Meteorological Organization, March 25
Speech by Ibrahim Osman, Deputy Secretary General, International Federation of Red Cross
and Red Crescent Societies

Risk reduction and the human cost of climate change

Mr Secretary General, distinguished guests, dear friends

Thank you, Dr Pachauri, for giving us such a compelling insight into the challenges we are all facing.

And thank you, Mr Jarraud, for giving the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies the opportunity to speak at this event. It is an honour me to be here and speak to you on behalf of Mr Markku Niskala, the Secretary General of the International Federation.

I hope that I will bring a fresh perspective to the debate on climate change and its consequences.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The International Federation that I represent is not an environmental or political organization. We, like the wider International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement we belong to, are neutral and impartial. We give help, support and comfort to people in crisis whoever and wherever they are, with no discrimination as to their race, nationality, religion or political beliefs.

Climate change is a humanitarian issue as much as it is an environmental, political and economic one. And as the world's largest humanitarian and disaster response network, the Red Cross Red Crescent is mainly concerned with the human cost of climate change.

We have millions of volunteers and staff working through 186 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in communities across the world – and many of these communities are already dealing with some of the consequences of climate change.

Last February, Sarita Messida, a 14-year-old primary school student in the town of Vilanculos in Mozambique, narrowly escaped serious injury when Cyclone Favio struck her home. She was hit by a sheet of iron that had been torn loose by the fierce winds, and only just managed to raise her hands to protect her head just in time.

Cyclone Favio destroyed more than 6,000 houses and injured more than 60 people in the area. The cyclone ripped the roof off the local hospital and left the place gutted. In spite of the devastation, Sarita eventually received treatment for her injuries from the hospital's heroic staff.

I assume that none of you have met Sarita Messida, and you may not have heard of a place called Vilanculos in Mozambique. But this is what the volunteers and staff of the Red Cross and Red Crescent do: we meet the Saritas of this world in places few people have heard of on a daily basis and we do our best to give them help and support.

Extreme weather events such as Cyclone Favio are becoming more common, whilst changing weather patterns and melting glaciers are threatening precious water resources. Increased temperatures have also led to the appearance of diseases like dengue and malaria at higher and higher altitudes.

The people hardest hit by the effects of climate change are the world's most vulnerable, the elderly, the sick and the poorest people in the poorest countries.

I have no doubt that the humanitarian consequences of climate change will be one of the greatest challenges facing the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the coming decades – and I know that action must be taken now if these effects are to be mitigated.

Response alone is no longer enough. The impact of climate change on disasters, on health crises – on vulnerability in general – underlines the importance of making communities stronger and more resilient, and on making them better able to withstand challenges.

The most striking recent example of the value of risk reduction and disaster preparedness played out in Bangladesh in December 2007, when Cyclone Sidr hit the region. Thousands of Red Crescent volunteers, using bicycles and megaphones, travelled around the threatened communities and helped evacuate hundreds of thousands of people from the path of the cyclone and into shelter.

These actions had real impact. In 1991, when a similar storm hit Bangladesh, more than 100,000 people were killed. This time, 3,000 people died. This is still unacceptable, but the value of risk reduction could not be clearer.

Extreme weather events cannot be prevented but they do not have to lead to devastating or catastrophic disasters. The key is to be willing to invest in disaster risk reduction – in public health initiatives, community preparedness and emergency planning.

Nicaragua is no stranger to natural disasters. It has experienced many severe storms over the past decade, with Hurricane Mitch causing massive death and destruction in 1998. It is particularly vulnerable to climate change, with experts predicting that Central America will experience higher temperatures and a remarkable decrease in rainfall in coming years.

So the Nicaraguan Red Cross is helping communities located along the country's Atlantic Coast to face up to the threat of increasingly severe hurricane seasons and weather extremes.

As well as playing a key role in the country's National Risk Management Plan, the Red Cross has been implementing climate change projects in several rural communities, as well as urban areas, aimed at changing people's behaviour in response to disasters.

The Red Cross also carries out risk management activities and helps with the organization of contingency plans and the training of volunteer response brigades. Micro-projects, including the construction of "safe cabinets" to store radio communication equipment and the construction of pedestrian bridges in case of flooding, are also supported by the local Red Cross, as are evacuation centres.

In Viet Nam, the Red Cross has planted mangrove trees to protect the sea dyke that runs along the country's coastline. The mangroves provide protection against the tropical storms and sea surges that are becoming more frequent with climate change.

In all, the cost of planning and planting has been about 1.1 million US dollars - but this has helped reduce the cost of maintaining the dyke by 7.3 million US dollars per year.

The monetary cost of disaster preparedness does not have to be high, and the simplest efforts can make a big difference.

Let me tell you about the village of Satiantoli in Bangladesh. Every year, seasonal floods inundate the village and its surrounding low-lying areas, a debilitating pattern exacerbated by climate change. The floods not only disrupt lives, but isolate the communities, severely impacting upon the villagers' livelihoods and education.

All it took to reduce this impact was 300 metres of bamboo and just over a thousand Swiss francs. That's all it cost to build a simple bridge giving the 15,000 villagers uninterrupted access to the main highway, no matter how intense the flooding.

One Bangladesh Red Crescent volunteer described the building of the bridge as a true community effort.

"We worked day and night to build this bridge," he said. "The whole community participated. Some gave money, some gave bamboo and the rest worked to build it."

The Red Cross Red Crescent works within communities like Satiantoli to help people prepare for and withstand disasters such as floods and cyclones. Our volunteers live and work in the cities, towns and villages that they serve. We believe that lives are saved and improved by mobilizing the power of humanity – and that this power lives within communities.

Sometimes the smallest gesture can save lives, and risk reduction doesn't have to be a complicated process. In Samoa, for example, the Red Cross realised that almost every village in the country had different words for 'north', 'south', 'east' and 'west'.

As you can imagine, this made it very difficult to issue early warnings or direct people to shelters when a storm is approaching.

Local Red Cross volunteers now help to interpret meteorological information and weather reports, making sure that everyone threatened by extreme weather understands when to seek shelter – and where that shelter is located.

It's clear that we have to talk to one another more often if we are to learn more about climate change and work to reduce the suffering it will cause.

The coming two years are critical. The International Federation is encouraged by the outcome of the Bali climate change conference, but a lot more work needs to be done if the international community is to reach concrete and meaningful commitments in Copenhagen in 2009.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Red Cross Red Crescent is ready and able to play its part in this process. We are committed to contributing to the development of adaptation policies and measures at local, national and international levels.

We believe that adaptation policies must play a central role in the international community's approach to climate change. Specifically there needs to be:

- Agreement on quantifiable, predictable and adequate resources for funding of climate risk reduction and adaptation measures
- Agreement on the mobilization of these resources, and
- Agreement on the implementation of these resources through programmes that will prioritise the most vulnerable people.

The International Federation will increase partnerships, cooperation and dialogue with governments, international organizations, knowledge centres and civil society organizations in order to ensure that these goals are met.

We welcome the strong partnership that we have with the World Meteorological Organization and look forward to building on this in the future.

The International Federation and the WMO work together on three levels. More than 30 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies collaborate with national meteorological offices in their respective countries. In Geneva, our disaster policy and preparedness department works closely with the weather and disaster risk reduction services. And the two organizations work on an inter-agency level through the ISDR system and the international early warning programme.

While National Societies work to strengthen country-level early warning systems, the International Federation's current priorities are threefold:

- To work with the WMO to strengthen community-based early warning in countries in Africa and the Americas
- To work together to produce an early warning product for early action, seasonal forecasting and longer-term climate change predictions
- And to work together to strengthen the international early warning programme.

The Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre in the Netherlands is playing a leading role by liaising with the IPCC and encouraging Red Cross and Red Crescent societies to work closely with the national meteorological office in their own countries.

In many cases, this collaboration has proved extremely useful and has strengthened both organizations. But there are many challenges in bringing detailed scientific information on climate change to the community level at which the Red Cross Red Crescent works.

I believe that there is much that we can teach each other as we face the challenges created by climate change. The International Federation and the World Meteorological Organization must make a long-term investment in each other, and embark on a permanent dialogue.

Through this permanent dialogue, the Red Cross Red Crescent can learn more about the scientific aspects of climate change prediction, prevention and mitigation. And, in turn, bodies such as the World Meteorological Organization can benefit from our disaster preparedness and response expertise, and our unparalleled community presence across the world.

The Red Cross Red Crescent is committed to protecting and assisting the most vulnerable - the elderly, the sick and the poorest people in the poorest countries. It is these people who will most affected in the months and years to come. We must be ready to help them.

Mr Secretary General, distinguished guests, dear friends, thank you.