

South Asia Policy Dialogue on Regional Risk reduction  
Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi  
21-22 August

**Full Text of Inaugural Speech of Shri Shivraj Patil,  
Hon'ble Home Minister, Government of India**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me immense pleasure to be here with you to inaugurate the first ever Regional Dialogue on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management in South Asia, involving all the stakeholders within and outside the government. I congratulate the organizers for taking this initiative, which has been long over due.

South Asia, as is well known, is the home of more than one fifth of the humanity. It is also the birthplace of some of the oldest civilizations of the world. Yet South Asia is considered to be one of the poorest regions of the globe. The vulnerability of the poor people of South Asia is aggravated by various types of natural hazards that many of the countries face at regular intervals, causing deaths and sufferings to hundreds and thousands of people.

For a long time we were used to accept these natural disasters as angers of God or as wraths of nature. The public policy for dealing with the disasters was limited to providing only relief and rehabilitation assistance to the sufferers.

Now things are beginning to change very fast. There is now a complete paradigm shift in policy - from post disaster relief and rehabilitation to a holistic management of the entire disaster cycle - prevention, mitigation, preparedness response, relief, reconstruction and recovery. The role of government has expanded

from providing ex-gratia assistance to the affected people for immediate amelioration of their sufferings. Governments are now concerned how disasters can be prevented by an effective early warning system, and how various structural and non-structural measures can be taken in advance for mitigating the effects of natural hazards. We cannot prevent the natural hazards which are endemic to our geology, geography and climate, but we can certainly prevent the hazards from becoming disasters.

This change in policy had taken place in Bangladesh, which was the first to set up a separate Ministry of Food and Disaster Management. In India we have enacted a comprehensive legislation on Disaster management, creating institutional structures from the central to the provincial levels, vesting them with powers, functions and resources to manage the disasters, both natural and man made, in a holistic manner. So has Sri Lanka, which has also enacted its law, created a separate Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights and adopted a *Road Map on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management*. After the devastating earthquake of Mujaffarabad of October 2005 Pakistan is also putting in place a legal and institutional system for disaster management. I understand that Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan and Maldives are also reviewing their policies and practices to set up a holistic system of disaster management.

I am told that senior government functionaries from all the South Asian countries including Afghanistan are present here today and there would be a full session devoted to the Disaster Management Policies and Framework of all the countries. This will provide an excellent opportunity to interact and learn from the emerging policies and practices of different South Asian countries.

I feel gratified by the presence of various international and regional organizations as also national and international NGOs and resource persons who would be carrying with them experiences around the

globe, which would place the emerging frameworks of disaster management in South Asian countries in proper perspectives.

I feel that the recent changes in public policy on disaster management in South Asia has been triggered by a number of factors. The first and foremost is the mega disasters of the recent decades. In Bangladesh 300,000 people lost their lives due to cyclone followed by flood in 1970. Similar disaster in 1991 claimed another 138,866 lives. In India 10,086 people died due to the super cyclone of Orissa in 1999 and another 13,805 people lost their lives due to earthquake in Gujarat. In Sri Lanka 35,399 people perished due to tsunami of December 2004, which also consumed as many as 12,405 people in different parts of India. In Pakistan 85,000 people lost their lives due to earthquake of October last year.

In all these calamities many more people were injured, hundreds of families became homeless, millions lost their livelihood, women lost their husbands, children became orphans, aged and the physical and mentally disabled lost their support system. Surely human sufferings of such a scale are not acceptable by any standards, particularly in democratic societies based on respect and concern for human rights.

The second factor that led to the paradigm shift in policy is the realization that all these disasters have been eroding much of our hard earned gains of development. I have seen studies that have pointed out that between 2 to 16 percent of the GDP of different South Asian countries are lost every year due to natural disasters. These are huge losses, which cannot be accepted. We find it so difficult to mobilize resources for education, public health and other social sector schemes; surely we cannot accept that 2% of our GDP, which amounts to 6 billion US dollars, are lost every year to natural disasters when we can not spend that much for our public health. Therefore disaster losses must be prevented or

mitigated and kept at its lowest minimum. Various studies have shown that a dollar spent on mitigating disaster saves 5 dollars to be spent subsequently on relief and reconstruction. Surely it is more prudent and economical to invest on prevention, mitigation and preparedness which have a lasting and sustainable impact than to spend on relief and reconstruction, which creates dissatisfaction everywhere. This is a simple economics, of development economics, which have learnt with a heavy price. We have a very firm conviction that disaster risk reduction is no longer an issue of relief and rehabilitation but of development. Therefore we have decided that it should be mainstreamed into the process of development in every sector at all levels. We had announced this in our Tenth Five Year Plan in 2002 and we are going to follow this in a much more vigorous and effective manner in our Eleventh Plan that is currently under formulation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Announcing a policy, promulgating a law or creating an institution is a relatively easy task; much more challenging and difficult is the implementation of the policy for achieving the desired results. This would require mobilization and investment of resources on mitigation and a sound system of governance to ensure that these scarce resources are optimally utilized. It would also require capacity building and empowerment of all stakeholders at all levels including the community. It would require innovative and imaginative application of science and technology for generation and dissemination of effective early warning systems, for establishing a sound emergency communication network, for building safe homes and infrastructure, for quick and accurate assessment of losses and so on. It would require training, capacity building of all stake holders based on research and lessons learnt exercises from previous disasters. It would also require generation of mass awareness sensitization programmes and involvement and participation of all stakeholders. Each one of these tasks is

stupendous, and requires careful planning and coordinated efforts of a number of players both within and outside the government.

I am happy to note that many of these crucial issues are going to be discussed in separate Thematic Sessions today and tomorrow. I am told that eminent resource persons from different South Asian countries would be making their presentations on different aspects of these issues. My advice would be that the Thematic Sessions should focus more on implementation aspects of the policies and frameworks that different countries have adopted in the recent years. I am sure that there would be a lot to learn from each other's experiences and good practices in different fields and this dialogue would facilitate such exchange of ideas.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We must admit that due to various reasons the extent and degree of cooperation among the South Asian countries for disaster risk reduction and management have remained rather slow, compared to many other regions of the world. Surely there is a great scope for increased cooperation and exchange of ideas and information.

Happily, some good beginnings have been made in the recent past. First, following the Indian Ocean Tsunami the Environment Ministers of SAARC countries had called upon the countries to develop a *Comprehensive Framework of Disaster Management in South Asia*. It is gratifying to note that an Expert Group has already developed a Framework and the same shall be considered for approval at the Fourteenth SAARC Summit at Delhi early next year. The Framework is based on the Hyogo Framework of Action that was adopted at the World Convention of Disaster Reduction held at Kobe Japan in January 2005, which all the South Asian countries have endorsed.

Secondly, the Heads of States and Governments of the SAARC countries have approved the Indian proposal to set up a SAARC Centre for Disaster Management at the premises of National Institute of Disaster Management at New Delhi. I am informed that the modalities for setting up the Centre have been decided and the Centre shall start functioning from October this year. This would indeed be a good beginning.

In the context of these developments the South Asian Policy Dialogue involving all stakeholders assumes great significance. We have before us a South Asian Framework for Disaster Management and we would also have before us a South Asian Disaster Management Centre. Therefore our focus should be to ensure how this Centre can be developed as an effective forum for strengthening of regional cooperation so that it can take upon itself the responsibility of implementing the relevant issues and tasks of the South Asian Framework for Disaster Management. Similarly we have to strengthen other regional bodies and establish a powerful networking with all relevant organizations and institutions in all countries so that the Centre can emerge as a resource base and a think tank on disaster management in South Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to note that distinguished representatives of Afghanistan are present in this policy dialogue. Afghanistan is part of the geography of South Asia and therefore it is natural that Afghans should take an active part in this South Asian Policy Dialogue on disaster management.

I am sure this two daylong policy dialogue would stimulate ideas and promote interaction and exchange of thoughts and information on various dimensions of disaster risk reduction and management.

I would be looking forward to a meaningful, effective and result oriented outcome of this dialogue which would help all of us to take our agenda forward for reducing risks of disasters in South Asia.

I wish the organizers and the participants good luck in their deliberations.

I wish our guests from South Asia and other parts of the world a very comfortable stay in Delhi.

Thank you.