

South Asia Policy Dialogue
(August 21-22, 2006)
Vigyan Bhavan, Hall No. 4, New Delhi

Full Text of Speech of Shri Ananad Sharma, Hon'ble Minister of State for External Affairs, Government of India.

Mr. Vinod Chandra Menon, Hon'ble Member, National Disaster Management Authority, Ms Vishaka Hidellege President Practical Action Sri Lanka, Mr. Chakrabarti, Executive Director, National Institute of Disaster Management, distinguish participants, ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to be here this afternoon at this Valedictory Session of the South Asia Policy Dialogue on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, which I am told, is the first ever workshop involving various stakeholders of South Asian countries including Afghanistan.

South Asia is one of the most disaster prone regions of the world. The relative vulnerability of this region has been compounded by a number of factors. First, the geographical location, the geological formation and the climate variability of the region is such that it cannot avoid various types of natural hazards, which are almost

endemic to this region. The Himalayas is the largest and mightiest of the mountain ranges in the world but it is also the youngest and is still under evolution. The tectonic friction between Eurasia and India which created the Himalayas have resulted in many massive earthquakes in this region, the latest being the earthquake in our neighboring State of Pakistan which consumed more than 83,000 lives over there and nearly 1000 lives in India. Large scale deforestation of the mountains have increased the siltation load of our rivers and reservoirs, reducing their carrying capacity, which causes floods in large parts of most of the South Asian Countries every year resulting in untold miseries and suffering of the people. The atmospheric depression over the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea result in high speed cyclonic storms, which affect parts of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan at regular intervals. We have other slow onset of disasters like drought, which affect large parts of the region. Thanks to the elaborate food security system the droughts no longer cause famines and large-scale deaths of human and cattle population, as these used to during the pre independence days, but these are still creating serious livelihood problems for a large number of people in regular succession.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our South Asia is one of the most populous regions of the world. Nearly one out of every fifth person of the globe lives in this region, but they share less than one and half percent of the global wealth. Poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition are major challenges of the region. It is the human poverty, which aggravates the vulnerability from natural disasters. It is the poor people without proper shelter and livelihood opportunities that suffer most in disasters and it take years and some time generations for them to recover from these losses.

Therefore disaster risk reduction and management is one of the most challenging developmental issues currently being faced by the South Asian Countries. Repeated mega disasters have made us to realize that we must take serious measures to reduce the risk of disasters so that human miseries and sufferings are reduced and we do not have to divert our scarce resources from development to relief and rehabilitation.

Many countries in the world have done it and there are no reasons why we cannot do it. We can definitely learn a lot from the experiences of the developed countries, but sometimes highly capital-intensive models of the west may not be very appropriate for us. For example, we had the earthquake in Bhuj in 2001 which took

more than 13,000 precious lives, and we prepared a reconstruction plan of about 2 billion dollars and the work we have done here has been highly commended as a good practice for replication in other places. Earlier in 1995 there was another earthquake in Japan – in Kobe – which consumed more than 5000 lives, and a massive reconstruction plan of nearly 150 billion dollars was put in place for rebuilding Kobe. Similarly almost 130 billion dollars are being spent for rebuilding New Orleans where hurricane Katrina had taken less than 1000 lives. Surely countries of South Asia cannot invest such resources for reconstruction and mitigation.

We have to look for low cost innovative measures that have maximum impact. Some people think that the poor and illiterate people of South Asia as a great burden on our development, but I do not think so. I feel that they are our great assets. You help them with simple information and tool kits to sensitize, train and organize themselves and you can see what huge differences they make in the situations on the ground. After the devastating cyclones of East Pakistan of 1970, which killed 300,000 lives, the national and local leadership of Bangladesh empowered the community with low cost knowledge and tools, which has successfully prevented such disasters in future. This again has been cited a good practice around the world.

Let us not forget that we may be poor compared to the standards of the developed countries, but our poor people are carrying the burden of accumulated knowledge and wisdom of a civilization, which is more than three thousand years old. During all these years our communities have learnt to live with natural hazards and develop a coping mechanism for resilience. There is much to learn from our indigenous and time tested knowledge which many scholars have described as 'dying wisdom'. There is need to preserve, document, reactivate and further rejuvenate such wisdom. This is possibly if we place the community at the focus of our efforts for disaster risk and mitigation. I am happy that you had a full thematic session devoted to CBDRM or community based disaster risk management. Here there are lots that each of the South Asian country can learn from the other.

Ladies and gentlemen,

By making emphasis on the people and the community and their ancient wisdom, I am not all belittling the importance that modern science and technology can play for disaster risk reduction and management. The recent advances in remote sensing, GIS and information and communication technologies have made a huge

difference in predicting and giving early warning of disasters and in assessing the hazards and risks. Our scientific and technological institutions are doing marvelous jobs in this field and some of them are best in the world. I am told that Earthquake Engineering Department of the Indian Institute of Technology at Roorkee is the oldest earthquake engineering department in the world. The manual on earthquake resistant constructions developed by the Institute has been translated in many languages around the world and are still being used in countries as far away as Latin America. No doubt there are lots to learn and assimilate from the recent advances in science and technology in the developed world, but there are equally lots to learn among ourselves. Many developed countries have now started learning from us and surely we would gain by learning from each other.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Natural disasters do not need visa to travel from one country to another. We have seen how Indian Ocean Tsunami affected 38 countries – from Indonesia in Asia to Somalia in Africa. It affected four out of eight South Asian countries. We have seen how the earthquake of October 2005 devastated both parts of Kashmir. We know that floods in Bihar are caused by the behaviour of the

drainage system in Nepal and how floods of Assam are influenced by the discharge from Tibet. We also know that cyclonic storms over Bay of Bengal can affect both Bangladesh and India and that depressions over Arabian Sea can hit both Gujarat and Sindh. Therefore tracking low pressure over both the sea can be of benefit to both the countries as also Sri Lanka and Maldives.

Therefore there is large and wide scope for cooperation among countries of South Asia to learn from each other on diverse fields, to help each other in different ways and to create a mutual of bond of friendship and coordination at all levels.

Unfortunately it has taken many years to start this of process of cooperation. But we are happy that this has started at the long last. At he Government to Government Level two major initiatives have taken place in the recent past. The first is the SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management which has been developed by an Expert Group, endorsed by SAARC Environment Ministers and which would be formally adopted at the 14th SAARC Summit that would be held in New Delhi on 3-4 April 2006. The second is the setting up of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre, which is expected to start functioning in Delhi from October this year. I am sure that with these two initiatives a

beginning shall be made for institutionalizing cooperation among South Asian countries on a regular and long term basis.

No doubt the Governments of all the South Asian countries would have to play pivotal roles in further nurturing, cementing, intensifying and diversifying the mutual cooperation, but the task of disaster risk reduction and management is so much complex, multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral that it can not and it should not remain confined to the limited efforts of the Governments alone. It must encompass all the sectors and all the stakeholders – the community, the training and capacity building institutions, the scientific and technological institutions, the corporate sectors, the NGOs and the voluntary sector and the media. It must engage them continuously at all levels - the national, sub-regional, regional and global levels.

I am aware that in each of the South Asian countries significant efforts are being made at the national level to involve all the stakeholders. In fact each of the South Asian country has agreed to develop a National Platform of all the stake holders for disaster risk reduction and management, involving all the stakeholders.

At the global level a Global Platform is also in the process of being set up involving national governments, international agencies, various multi-lateral funding agencies and international GOs and multi-national corporations. The first meeting of the proposed Global Platform is expected to take place at Geneva sometime during 2007.

What is now necessary is to develop a Regional Platform on disaster risk reduction and management by involving all the regional players within and outside the government. I am happy this Regional Policy Dialogue has adopted the Delhi Declaration on South Asian Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, which would promote, facilitate and catalyze a regional movement on disaster risk reduction and management across sectors. I feel that this is a significant achievement of this two days South Asia Policy Dialogue on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management. I am sure that the UNISDR which is responsible for facilitating the implementation of the Hyogo Framework of Action 2005-15 would take note of this Declaration and would nurture, encourage and facilitate this new born initiative of a South Asian regional movement of disaster risk reduction and management.

I congratulate the National Institute of Disaster Management Delhi, Practical Action Sri Lanka and Duryog Nivaran Pakistan to think, plan and organize this Dialogue. I congratulate all the participants from the Government and outside the Government from all the South Asia countries including Afghanistan, which is likely to join SAARC in the near future, for taking part in this historical initiative.

I wish you good luck in your noble initiative.

I thank the organizers for inviting me to give this Valedictory Address.

Thank you all.