

21 January 2011

Excellency,

The High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals, held from 20 to 22 September 2010, acknowledged that disaster risk reduction and increasing resilience to natural hazard can have multiplier effects and accelerate achievement of the MDGs. As a follow-up, I will be convening an Informal Thematic Debate on Disaster Risk Reduction on 9 February 2011.

I am pleased to share with you the latest concept paper and draft programme of the Informal Thematic Debate for your reference. Updated information about the event is available on the website of the President of the General Assembly.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deiss', written in a cursive style.

Joseph Deiss

All Permanent Representatives and  
Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
New York

**INFORMAL THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE 65<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE  
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON DISASTER RISK REDUCTION**  
Wednesday, 9 February 2011 · New York

Background

According to the figures cited in the Report of the Secretary-General (A/65/388), 394 disasters linked to natural hazards occurred between July 2009 and June 2010 alone, affecting more than 203 million people and causing approximately \$78 billion of economic damage. In addition to increased exposure of communities to extreme weather events and other natural hazards, key drivers of disaster risk include poverty, rapid urbanization and the impact of climate change.

Recognizing the importance of reducing vulnerabilities<sup>1</sup> and risks to hazards<sup>2</sup>, especially in developing countries whose development gains can be wiped away with a single disaster, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed in 2005 the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters* to promote systematic integration of disaster risk reduction efforts into policies, plans and programmes for sustainable development and poverty reduction. With the Hyogo Framework for Action providing strategic guidance, national and local governments and other organizations at local, national, regional and international levels have taken measures to reduce underlying risk factors and strengthen disaster preparedness.

It is often assumed that development efforts are sufficient to reduce disaster risk and strengthen adaptation to climate change. However, this is not the case, though on the flip side, unsustainable development practices *can* contribute to increasing disaster risk. Investing in measures to reduce risk by local and national governments is critical, but this remains too poorly understood both in scale and in effectiveness.

As demonstrated by the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that hit Haiti in January 2010, wherein 222,570 people lost their lives (as opposed to Chile's 8.8 magnitude earthquake in February 2010, which caused 562 fatalities, and the 7.1 magnitude earthquake in New Zealand in September 2010, where no casualties were incurred), poor countries remain at a higher risk of disasters. Inadequate urban planning and infrastructure further undermine vulnerable livelihoods and threaten to reverse progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Greater efforts and global partnerships are needed to

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<sup>1</sup> Vulnerability is defined as “the conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes, which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards.” (UN/ISDR, Geneva 2004)

<sup>2</sup> Hazard is defined as “a potentially damaging physical event, phenomenon or human activity that may cause the loss of life or injury, property damage, social and economic disruption or environmental degradation.” Hazards can include latent conditions that may represent future threats and can have different origins: natural (geological, hydrometeorological and biological) or induced by human processes (environmental degradation and technological hazards). (UN/ISDR, Geneva 2004)

safeguard the development investments in order to reduce poverty and strengthen countries' capacity to cope with disaster impacts.

### Objective

In this context, the Informal Thematic Debate of the General Assembly on Disaster Risk Reduction aims to promote understanding on how effective investment policies, practices and sustainable urban management can reduce risk and exposure to disasters. Special focus will be on rapidly expanding urban areas, where risk, population and economic assets are concentrated. (In fact, in the last decade, the urban population in developing countries has risen by 77 per cent, to nearly 2.6 billion people.)

Building on the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the MDGs (September 2010, New York), which acknowledged that disaster risk reduction and increasing resilience to natural hazards can accelerate the achievement of the MDGs, the thematic debate will underscore the linkages between disaster risk reduction, poverty eradication and sustainable development. The outcome of the thematic debate, a President's Summary, will inform, among others, the third session of the biennial Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, which will convene in Geneva in May 2011.

### Tentative Programme

The thematic debate will take place on Wednesday, 9 February 2011 at UN Headquarters in New York. The debate, which will consist of two moderated panel discussions with high-level experts, will focus on building local resilience in urban areas and promoting investment for disaster risk reduction. The floor will be opened to delegates and other participants for questions to the panelists as well as to share their experience and other perspectives.

Time	Programme
10 – 11 a.m.	<p>Opening Remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss, President of the General Assembly</li> <li>• H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General</li> </ul> <p>Keynote Speakers (tbc)</p>
11 a.m. – 1 p.m.	<p><b><i>Interactive Panel Discussion 1: Invest Today for a Safer Tomorrow</i></b>  Moderated by Ms. Zeinab Badawi, World News Today Presenter, BBC World News and BBC Four</p> <p>Panelists</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms. Tioulong Saumura, Member of the Parliament of Cambodia and Vice-President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Standing Committee on Sustainable Development, Finance and Trade</li> <li>• Ms. Tumusiime Rhoda Peace, Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, African Union Commission</li> <li>• Amb. Toni Frisch, Chair of UNEP/OCHA Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies</li> <li>• Mr. Rubem Hofliger, General Director, Natural Disaster Fund (FONDEN), Mexico</li> <li>• Mr. Thomas Loster, Munich Re Foundation</li> </ul>
1:15 – 2:30 p.m.	Side events to be organized
3 – 5:45 p.m.	<p><b><i>Interactive Panel Discussion 2: Cities at Risk - Addressing the Challenges of Disaster Risk in Urban Settings</i></b>  Moderated by Ms. Zeinab Badawi, World News Today Presenter, BBC World News and BBC Four</p> <p>Introductory Speakers (tbc)</p> <p>Panelists</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. Khalifa Sall, Mayor of Dakar, Senegal</li> <li>• Mr. Kadir Topbas, Mayor of Istanbul, Turkey</li> <li>• Mr. Mawardy Nurdin, Mayor of Banda Aceh, Indonesia</li> <li>• Ms. Mary Jane Ortega, Secretary-General, CITYNET</li> </ul>
5:45 – 6 p.m.	<p>Closing Remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms. Margareta Wahlström, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction</li> <li>• H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss, President of the General Assembly</li> </ul>