UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

ITU/ESCAP Regional Workshop on Disaster Communications

12-15 December 2006
Bangkok

Opening Statement by Mr. Kim Hak-Su
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of UNESCAP

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this Regional Workshop, which is co-sponsored by the International Telecommunication Union and UNESCAP.

Disasters severely impact multidimensional developmental efforts. They overturn efforts to improve the quality of our lives. This decade has seen numerous droughts, volcanic eruptions, fires, landslides and other disasters. In this year alone, over 5000 people lost their lives to storms and floods in Asia and the Pacific. In 2004 Niue was almost wiped out by a typhoon, while over 45 million people in Asia were displaced by flooding. And who can forget the Bam earthquake of 26 December 2003, the South Asian earthquake of 8 October 2005, or the earthquake and tsunami of 26 December 2004? That last catastrophe brought a renewed focus in the region on the need for improved disaster management capacities.

Disaster management has long been high on UNESCAP’s agenda. Our efforts in this important area of socio-economic development supported the creation of the Mekong River Commission, the Typhoon Committee, and the Panel on Tropical Cyclones; the last two in collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization. Disaster management, using information and communication technology, including space technology, ICST for short, has been part of our programme for well over a decade. More recently, we have been working to promote increased regional cooperation in comprehensive multi-disaster management.

Indeed, the 61st Session of the Commission held last year, requested the secretariat to play an active role in supporting improved regional cooperation in comprehensive disaster management. To this end, we have organized several activities, and are also assisting the region through the management of the Multi-donor Voluntary Trust Fund as Tsunami Early Warning Arrangements in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia which was established with the generous contributions of the Governments of Thailand and Sweden. At the High-Level Expert Group Meeting on Technical Options for Disaster Management Systems: Tsunamis and Others, held in June last year, there was a call for additional activities in disaster management communications. ITU has a similar mission in this regard. Thus this meeting today.

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There has been remarkable progress in disaster management. Such progress has greatly benefited the region. For example, as recently as 35 years ago a single large cyclone or typhoon sometimes killed up to hundreds of thousands of people. Since then we have benefited from new technology such as improved storm forecasts, new policies and programmes, including community-based efforts. Now, such a storm might claim only one per cent as many victims as had previously been the case.

Nevertheless, there are additional advances which have yet to benefit the region. These include evolving technologies for “nowcasting” flash floods, for forecasting and monitoring drought, and for “nowcasting” public health risks such as disease outbreaks. They also include better use of telecommunications in managing disasters – from pre-event preparation – to early warning generation and dissemination – to response.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have made considerable progress, but we can do better. In the arena of forecasting, early warning, and timely and effective response to disasters, we at UNESCAP believe that the region is ready to step forward and do better.

I appreciate the immense value of technically sound, and regionally useful, communications as an integral part of overall disaster management. I understand that, among you, are eminent experts in various aspects of disaster management communications, and that many of you regularly confer with colleagues in your areas of specializations. If, during the course of this meeting, you should find a means strengthen regional cooperation in disaster management communications, it would be an important step toward the region’s improved management of disasters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We believe that your efforts in this meeting will lead to stronger regional cooperation in disaster management. We wish you every success in this endeavour.

Thank you.