



# Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and Water

*Please check against delivery.*

## ***Opening Remarks at the Lunch Meeting on 6 October 2015***

**Han Seung-soo**

Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction and Water

Founding Chair, High-Level Experts and Leaders Panel on Water and Disaster

&

Former Prime Minister, Republic of Korea

New York, USA

*6 October 2015*

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure and honour to address this distinguished audience today at this lunch meeting. Thank you very much for your attendance during this still busy time after the High Level Week of the United Nations where we celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the organization and adopted the groundbreaking 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

As I mentioned in my invitation letter to you all, the main objective of this meeting is to introduce my work as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Disaster Risk Reduction and Water and to hear your suggestions on how to mainstream water-related disaster risk reduction in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

As you know, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed me as his Special Envoy for Disaster Risk Reduction and Water in December 2013. My main task is to carry out high-level advocacy on behalf of the Secretary-General, and rally commitments from Member States, the private sector and civil society in support of the UN system's work on water-related disaster risk reduction. This is particularly relevant in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 - 2030.

During the past decade, water-related disasters have not only struck more frequently, but have also been more severe, hampering sustainable development by causing political, social, and economic upheaval in many countries. Water-related disasters, such as floods, droughts, storm surges and tsunamis, account for 90% of all disasters in terms of number of people affected. Therefore, the importance of addressing the issue of water-related disasters is obvious for the people working in the field of disaster risk management. However, the opposite is not always true. In other words, specialists in the water sector are not always taking disaster risk perspectives into account in their day-to-day work.

Therefore, part of my job as the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General is to help bridge the gap between water and disaster experts by promoting disaster risk reduction as a priority within the water agenda through high-level advocacy.

I am working in close cooperation with UN-Water and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction as main partners. My work aims to add value to the work of other UN agencies working on water and disasters, such as WMO and UNISDR, as

they coordinate disaster reduction strategies and synergies among the United Nations system. My work is dedicated to improving the visibility of the water and disasters agenda in the broader discussion on sustainable development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a part of my high level advocacy for water and disasters, I attended the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, where I called for a holistic approach towards sustainable development by treating disaster risk reduction and preparedness as an integral part of the agenda. Science and technology on Disaster Risk Reduction is advancing fast. I also requested the Governments to integrate best practices, and share lessons learnt from their peers as well as scientific community in their development plans.

In Sendai, seven global targets were agreed in the Post-2015 Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, including those to substantially reduce global disaster-related mortality and number of affected people as well as to reduce direct disaster-related economic losses in relation to the global GDP.

As for the first point, the mortality and number of affected people, the recent earthquake in Chile teaches us how “advanced planning and quick reaction by the authorities” can contribute to meeting this target.

The earthquake that struck the coast of Chile last month was the 6th biggest earthquake in Chile after the one in 2010 when the country lost more than 500 people. However, the Government and people reacted differently this time, and as a consequence, only 13 people are reported to have died.

Since 2010, the Chilean government has spent millions upgrading the country's seismic network of sensors, and made improvements to telecommunications systems that share critical information and warnings. Also, building codes became stricter and generally well enforced after the event in 2010. This is “building back better” in practice.

In reaction to the recent earthquake, more than one million people were evacuated this time when the alert was issued. People are now well versed in how to react at the time of an earthquake. And evacuation drills carried out earlier have also proven to be crucial in reducing the risk of massive disasters, like earthquakes.

This is an excellent example that shows how “preparedness” pays off. However, we must also think about quick recovery of water and sanitation service provision after disasters. For instance, the case of the Great East Japan Earthquake shows that only 34% received temporary toilet facilities after the earthquake and almost half of the people received the facility after 8 days. In Chile, 30,000 residents in the city close to the epicenter were reported immediately to be cut off from electricity or drinking water.

In order to facilitate a quick recovery of public service provision, such as drinking water and temporary toilet facilities, after disasters, it is critical to develop disaster risk reduction strategies at the sub-national or local level in line with the national development policies with the support of national governments.

Another part of my role as the Special Envoy is to reach out to national and local leaders working in the water and sanitation sectors to ensure their commitment to mainstream science and technology based disaster risk reduction principles in urban planning, and to strengthen the network of local authorities working in this field.

Now that we are meeting in New York, let me draw your attention to The New York Transit Museum in Brooklyn, which has just opened an exhibition called “Bringing Back the City: Mass Transit Responds to Crisis”. The exhibition documents the efforts of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to respond to disasters, such as hurricanes, floods and blackouts, looking back to the past experiences and lessons learned.

To learn from own experiences is certainly critical to improve disaster preparedness. However, I also would like to stress the importance of the learning from peers who had to deal with impacts of disasters. National governments should recognize and facilitate peer-to-peer learning at different levels so that people can prepare and mitigate risks before and after disasters hit.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has just been adopted here in New York, as most of you took part in negotiations first-hand. The 2030 Agenda recognizes that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable prerequisite for sustainable development.

By 2030, up to 325 million of the world's poorest and most vulnerable populations could be living in the 49 most hazard-prone countries of the world. According to the FAO, natural hazards and disasters in developing countries affected more than 1.9 billion people, and cost more than US\$494 billion in damages between 2003 and 2013.

It is worth emphasizing at this point that the goal clearly links the disaster risk reduction and poverty alleviation by targeting the reduction of direct disaster economic losses in relation to the global GDP.

In the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the adverse impact of disasters is potentially much bigger. For example, the damage caused by the Haiti earthquake in 2010 was equivalent to 120% of the country's GDP. In the case of Cyclone Evan in 2012, the damage in Samoa was estimated at 30 percent of GDP. And the total economic value of the effects caused by Tropical Cyclone Pam, which hit Vanuatu during the Sendai Conference earlier this year, was estimated to be approximately US\$450 million, which is equivalent to 64% of the country's GDP.

Disasters can wipe out all the development gains that have painstakingly been achieved. The Secretary-General said in his message for the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, which will be held in 2016 that "Disasters are striking with increased frequency and severity causing suffering for millions of people. We need new solutions, new ways of responding and new pathways to reliance." And, he continued, "Natural disasters happen more often, do more damage, last longer, and in many places recur before people have even had a chance to recover."

I believe that this is why world leaders must understand and recognize that the overarching aim of the 2030 Agenda to eradicate global poverty can only be achieved if it is supported by policies and regulations that directly target and minimize – to the extent possible - disaster risks, in line with the globally agreed frameworks and blueprints this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Solving global water problems is central to eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development. The World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report 2015<sup>1</sup> has identified water as the biggest societal and economic risk for the next ten years.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unsgab.org/#sthash.Nj8GobMS.dpuf>

2015 is not only a watershed year for the international development community at large, but also for the water community in particular: the Convention on the Protection and Use of Trans-boundary Watercourses and International Lakes, the so-called “Water Convention”, which was launched in the ECE region, will be opened to all UN Member States as of late 2015. The Water Convention aims to protect and ensure the quantity, quality and sustainable use of trans-boundary water resources by facilitating cooperation and provides an intergovernmental platform for the day-to-day development and advancement of trans-boundary cooperation.

Approximately 40 per cent of the world’s population lives in river and lake basins that comprise two or more countries, and over 90 per cent lives in countries that share basins. The existing 276 trans-boundary lake and river basins cover nearly one half of the Earth’s land surface and account for an estimated 60 per cent of global freshwater flow.

Water-related disasters, such as floods, know no borders, so effective response requires trans-boundary coordination and cooperation. And let me remind you once again, floods, droughts and windstorms are the most frequently occurring natural disaster events and account for almost 90 per cent of the 1,000 most disastrous events since 1990. The Water Convention, therefore, obliges Parties to prevent, control and reduce the trans-boundary impacts, including those potentially resulting from floods and from unilaterally decided flood protection measures, such as dams.

Taking into account the fact that the number of countries which share basins with other countries is 148, High-level Advocacy for the Water Convention to be adopted broadly will constitute one of the pillars of my work as the Special Envoy for Disaster Risk Reduction and Water in the near future.

In closing, I would like to share with you some of my plans from now until the end of the year. The first major activity we will organize will be the 2<sup>nd</sup> UN Special Thematic Session on Water and Disasters next month. I would like to invite all of you to attend this meeting at the United Nations Headquarters on November 18. As you will remember, the first Special Thematic Session was organized in March 2013 and attended by then Prince of Orange, Prince Willem-Alexander, now the King of the Netherlands, and Crown Prince Naruhito of Japan.

As the case of the recent Earthquake in Chile shows, the leadership and commitment by the high-level Government officials are critical for improving disaster preparedness. I also believe that to learn from the lessons from other countries is equally important. That is the

reason why these Special Thematic Sessions on Water and Disasters were initiated by the Secretary-General to create a place for sharing experiences.

I hope you share this view and consider the coming Special Session as a valuable opportunity for you to learn from the high-level leaders and experts in the sector of water and disasters. I would be very much delighted if you make use of this opportunity as a starter of your own initiatives in sharing experiences and good practices and exchanging views to promote actions at global, regional and country levels. I will be happy to support and work together with you in such case by, for example, inviting those high-level participants of the Thematic Session for further discussion with you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The time of this second Special Thematic Session is carefully chosen: It is intended to seize the momentum of the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by meeting just two weeks before COP21 in Paris. Hence, this Special Thematic Session will be a meeting to bridge the outcomes of these two landmark UN conferences. When we meet in November, our aim will be to compile messages and recommendations to be delivered to the COP 21 in December 2015 and other key conferences in 2016, including the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, and Habitat III in October 2016.

For too long now, we have been working in silos. We must break out of water and disaster silos and start working holistically by taking advantage of these conferences. We must reach all stakeholders to ensure they recognize the importance of water-related disaster risk reduction in their agendas and mainstream the tools and approaches provided by the Sendai Framework and SDGs in their day-to-day work. Furthermore, these major UN conferences will be another opportunity for me to reach out directly to high-level government officials to encourage their leadership in implementing concrete actions to integrated water-related disaster risk reduction in their development policies.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have highlighted only some of the issues, which are important in the context of the current international discussions on sustainable development and related water and disaster issues. However, the field is very broad and these examples only scratch the surface. In fact, I am here today mainly to hear from you, our distinguished guests, on your perspectives, priorities and expectations regarding high-level advocacy for mainstreaming water-related disaster risk reduction in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. On the basis of what I hear from you today, I am committed to aligning my future work program with your priorities and expectations to ensure that we all pull our efforts together to achieve stronger results with our limited resources.

Having gathered at this watershed moment of the United Nations, I look forward to an active discussion with you.

Thank you very much.