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**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the Launch of the 2009 Global
Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction**

UNESCO, 8 June 2009

Madam Assistant Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am very pleased to welcome you to UNESCO Headquarters for the Launch of the 2009 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Allow me to extend a special welcome to Ms Margareta Wahlström, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Secretary-General's Special Representative for the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action.

In this pivotal role, she is focusing international attention on disaster risk reduction at a time when climate change is steadily increasing the frequency and intensity of natural hazards worldwide. She is also the focal point within the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction for the coordination of strategies and programmes of Member States and other stakeholders for natural disaster reduction, and ensures synergy between disaster reduction strategies and those in the socio-economic and humanitarian fields.

Thank you for travelling from Geneva to present the report despite your busy schedule.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Natural disaster risk is on the rise. The dramatic increase in human and economic losses from disasters in recent years is alarming. Increased vulnerability and climate change are exacerbating the exposure of populations to natural hazards.

Over the past few years, we have witnessed tragic natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, wildfires, windstorms in all parts of the world. Images of the 6 April earthquake in the Abruzzi region of Italy are still vivid. But natural disasters often strike hardest at some of the world's poorest communities, which are the least well placed to defend themselves or to recover afterwards.

While natural hazards are not a new phenomenon, sadly, they tend only to attract attention when they manifest themselves as disasters. What is not generally realized is that many natural disasters could be greatly mitigated with adequate forethought and preparation, and that the cost of this would be small compared to the cost of relief and recovery efforts.

Let us reflect for a moment on the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004, which left close to 230,000 dead and displaced a staggering 1.5 million people. Entire community settlements were wiped out in more than four countries and the overall economic losses are estimated at \$10 billion. Sadly, communities were not prepared for such a disaster even though the hazard has always been real and known.

The scale of the losses was largely due to the absence of regional and national tsunami warning systems such as the one for the Pacific coordinated since 1965 by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Committee or IOC. Indeed, we had long advocated the need to extend the system to other oceans where there is a risk of tsunamis.

Unfortunately, it took a tragedy of the scale of the Indian Ocean Tsunami to awaken the international community to this call. Since then, we have made progress: the IOC is now coordinating the establishment of regional tsunami warning systems in the Indian Ocean, the North East Atlantic, Mediterranean and the Caribbean.

Human preparedness is also very important. In hazard-prone areas, everybody, from the youngest to the oldest inhabitant, needs both to be aware of risks and prepared for disasters. This includes public information and education campaigns and clear procedures for emergency response.

I am reminded here of Tilly Smith, the young British girl, who, remembering a geography lesson about tsunamis, was able to save dozens of lives on a beach in Phuket, Thailand, when the 2004 tsunami occurred. She had learned at school in England just before travelling to Phuket with her parents that when the sea withdraws suddenly it signals the coming of a tsunami. Therefore it is imperative to run inland in order to reach high ground. Tilly shared her experiences with us at UNESCO at the launch of the global 'Disaster Reduction Begins at School' Campaign.

The campaign's premise is very simple: we need to raise everyone's awareness of natural hazards, so that each citizen will know immediately what to do in the event of an alert.

Yet, despite the progress made since 2004 in extending the tsunami warning system, reducing and mitigating disaster risks is still not high on many governments' agenda.

Today, scientific knowledge enables us to develop the tools for building resilient societies, able not only to react to disasters, but also to plan for, prevent and mitigate their effects. For example, disaster losses could also be substantially reduced if buildings, particularly schools and hospitals, were built to be more earthquake-resilient and storm-proof.

UNESCO believes we need to make a major conceptual shift from a focus on disaster response, to an emphasis on disaster prevention.

For decades, the Organization has been actively engaged in the study of natural hazards and in building capacities to mitigate their effects. As an active partner in the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), UNESCO promotes international and regional networks of systems and expertise for the monitoring, exchange and analysis of hazards data, in particular data related to earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and landslides.

In addition to its work on regional tsunami warning systems, UNESCO is promoting the International Flood Initiative and the International Consortium on Landslides. It is also progressively laying the foundations for international and regional platforms for reducing earthquake disasters through the organization of group meetings among experts of different regions. UNESCO is also concerned with the integration of education and disaster risk reduction as well as with the protection of educational buildings and cultural monuments and sites in hazard-prone areas.

But we cannot do this alone and UNESCO is proud to form part of a network of UN agencies, inter-governmental groups, and non-governmental or civil society organizations that are teamed together as part of the ISDR.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must renew our commitment to the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 which was adopted by 168 governments at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan, in January 2005. This Framework represents an agreed road map for the international community to pursue measures for promoting disaster resilience.

We must also establish new partnerships that draw together stakeholders from all levels of society, across different regions, sectors and disciplines. Governments, academic and scientific communities, non governmental organizations, international organizations, local communities and the media are essential players in promoting safety measures. The concerted efforts of all these stakeholders are essential to building a culture of disaster resilience.

The 2009 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction is the result of such a collaborative effort, under the aegis of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR).

The report provides recommendations to help countries realign their development policies to take into account and promote disaster risk reduction. It contains best practices for disaster risk reduction, promotes wise land use and encourages the adoption of financial incentives such as insurances.

These recommendations can be a key tool for countries to implement the Hyogo Framework for action at the national level and ensure a safer environment for their populations.

Disaster preparedness and mitigation rank among the Organization's strategic objectives of the Medium-Term Strategy for 2008-2013. UNESCO has many programmes in place that deal in one way or another with the study of natural hazards and the mitigation of their effects. Operating as it does at the interface between education, the sciences, the social science, culture and communication, UNESCO has a vital role to play in contributing to constructing a global culture of disaster resilience.

I would like to take advantage of today's launch to renew UNESCO's commitment to continue working closely with the ISDR as a member of the UN system in order to achieve the objectives of the Hyogo Framework for Action, and through this, healthier, more secure and prosperous societies.

Thank you for your attention.