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International Disaster Reduction Conference (IDRC)

Disaster Risk Reduction in Africa

Davos, Switzerland – *Floods and droughts remain two of many hazards faced by disaster-prone Africa, but they're a perfect fit for one of the continent's key planners – Uganda's "water lady". Uganda's state minister for water, Maria Mutagamba, ranks as a rising political star among the nearly 1,000 experts at the weeklong International Disaster Reduction Conference (IDRC) meeting in this busy alpine resort.*

Minister Mutagamba was also one of her continent's highest-ranking panelists to address other global risk managers at the IDRC on needs and action called for in solving Africa's natural and man-made calamities. Ms Mutagamba admits it has not been easy joining a traditionally male domain, but she recognized the water post seemed to be the perfect role for her when she accepted the appointment five years ago. "Women in Africa are traditionally the ones to carry the water," she explained at a press briefing also attended by other African panelists here. She had earlier drawn heavy laughter from the global audience when she quipped that: "the role of African women has been a man-made disaster."

But men's attitudes are changing, the Ugandan politician said. "They're starting to appreciate us and the fact that we've been promoted. Women are strong in character, and they're determined, even though they often defer to men and withdraw from politics. "When it comes to coping with disaster," she added, "women can be relied upon to handle crises. They're working at home, and they're busy at the market earning money to feed the family. They're community leaders in Africa, but men didn't always recognize women's extra strength – their ability to mitigate and instruct."

Another woman panelist, Kenya's Marietha Chao S. Omanyo of Caritas Mariana International, insisted that African culture can't be ignored when discussing the continent's plans to reduce disaster risks. "It's women who bring home the firewood and fetch the water, not the men," she said. "They do the small errands, so the family can survive. "We are very powerful as women," she told IDRC delegates, "but the woman is always answerable to the man. Yet I'm hopeful in Kenya, because of a new attack on gender violence. We have to escort children to school to prevent rape. Now there's a death penalty against rape."

Ecweru Musa, a male spokesman for the Ugandan prime minister's office, had earlier called "good governance" a primary goal in reducing disaster risks from occurring. He said leaders needed to explain to the average person how he or she can save lives by preventive action.

The panel chairman, Prof. Hilary I. Inyang of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, said Africa's long list of natural and man-made disaster factors ought to include warm, because "war creates refugees." And Algeria's Djillali Benouar of the Built Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Bab Ezzouar, said pollution should be added to any list of disaster factors. "It's not just earthquakes and floods," he said. "We're used to these risks. We know how to respond to them, we just don't know how to prevent them. But it doesn't help to call them 'acts of God', because that's just a cover-up."

IDRC Chairman Walter J. Ammann urged African delegates to add their priority concerns to a draft declaration to be released before the conference closes.

The IDRC follows up the 2005 United Nations-sponsored conference held in Kobe, Japan – a gathering on combating natural disasters largely restricted to government officials. The Davos meetings also address man-made catastrophes such as war and terrorism. Those attending include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector. Four organizing partners are cosponsoring the IDRC: the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), the Global Alliance for Disaster Reduction (GADR) and the Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN). IDRC organizers say a follow-up conference modeled after the Davos framework will meet in Harbin, China, in 2007.

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