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International Disaster Reduction Conference (IDRC)

Disaster Reduction in China

Davos, Switzerland – *Chinese government officials and scholars admitted to nearly 1,000 global experts meeting here this week that their country is probably the most disaster prone in the world. Yet they insisted that their "top down" strategy toward rescue missions works well and is firmly entrenched to cope with all future catastrophes.*

A panel of top decision-makers from the People's Republic of China defended the "top down" approach at the International Disaster Reduction Conference (IDRC) in Davos where earlier speakers from other countries had stressed the need for "bottom up" planning. Polite questions about the nuance may take on added importance, since China will host a 2007 follow-up conference to the Davos event. It will be staged in Harbin, a metropolis near the Russian border that is home to many of the Chinese delegates here.

A presentation by Prof. Shi Peijun of the Beijing-based Institute of Disaster and Public Security conceded problems in carrying out the thousands of disaster-management plans. Part of the frustration, he said, arises from efforts to harmonize a two-pronged effort at the national and provincial levels. He noted that China had drafted nearly 24,300 emergency response plans for unexpected public accidents up to mid-March of this year. "There is no mature public-security management system," Professor Shi said, and this has resulted in what he called "severe sector function dividing" and a lag in management technologies. "Once in the face of severe events," the scholar added, "decisions are usually made by central or sectional administrative leaders, and the existing management defect appears."

One ranking leader, the vice governor of the province of Heilongjiang, Wang Donghua, advocated "top down" planning as essential in a press briefing. He called the approach "very important" in the government structure. Speaking through a translator, Wang explained that his post covers police and security, though counter-terrorism is not a major task. Army troops under his command stand by for use in disasters, and so do police and firefighters. Team drills occur regularly.

Asked about his definition of "bottom up" in the Chinese concept, Wang said it had a function if disasters occur at the level of a rural village. Then village leaders assumed planned duties to mobilize all local resources. According to Wang, all provinces must notify such villages within two hours if they are likely to be affected by an emergency. Then "bottom" officials take charge of commanding rescue crews and issuing them equipment.

Though terrorism doesn't rank as a major concern in China, Wang told reporters that man-made disasters do exist. A major concern: old factories that don't meet current building codes and may pollute rivers and air. Inspectors enforce tougher laws today, and a $3 billion fund has been set aside to make the reform plan happen. "We'll solve it in due time," Wang said, "but it doesn't happen overnight."

Dr. Walter Fust, director general of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), told delegates he considered lack of disaster insurance in many Third World countries a primary concern. He said SDC would work with the world's two major reinsurance providers, Swiss Re and Munich Re, to tackle this problem. Solutions, Fust said, could include crop insurance, calamity funds, and micro-credits as well as new cash structures.

Lyn Shepard, Conference Journalist
Information: Ms. Birgit Ottmer, Media Relations Manager, ottmer@slf.ch, +41 79 763 91 88 (mobile), +41 81 417 02 86 (office).

IDRC
Flüelastrasse 11
CH-7260 Davos Dorf
Switzerland

Phone +41 (0)81 417 02 25
Fax +41 (0)81 417 08 23
www.davos2006.ch
davos2006@slf.ch