International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos, August 25 – 29, 2008

Press Release – Friday, 29 August 2008

Wenchuan earthquake in China

Measures to avoid secondary disasters

The last day of the International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC 2008 in Davos was dedicated to the Wenchuan earthquake in China. The Wenchuan region, located in the Sichuan province in southwestern China was hit by a devastating earthquake with a magnitude of 7.9, resulting in a huge number of deaths and injuries, damages to houses, buildings and infrastructure. The disasters also caused massive land-slides, now blocking large rivers. The dams, having been formed by the landslides, are highly instable, threatening millions of people in cities downriver if they were to fail. A number of Chinese ministries are working under high pressure to realize measures to stabilize these dams, thus controlling secondary disasters. An integral, multi-hazard approach, taking into account all factors involved, can be the only way to mitigate the consequences of such a huge disaster. Additionally, it is important to enhance the monitoring and predicting facilities. Special attention was given to the role of the media in the reporting on the earthquake. A number of newspapers were observed and their output analyzed, to understand how the media could be better included in the information schemes surrounding a disaster.

Building codes could have prevented losses at schools

Throughout the day, a number of special seminars highlighted different aspects of the earthquake, its consequences, damage assessment and lessons learned. A focus is put on the development and implementation of building standards, especially, as recent natural disasters have been marked by losses in schools and other educational establishments. It was noted that, had the schools in the Sichuan province been designed to conform to state-of-the-art building codes, the losses could have been significantly reduced.

Looking at 100 ideas for action

The closing ceremony, marking the official end of the conference at noon today, presented the results of the initiative that had been started in last Monday's opening ceremony – 100 ideas for action, and suggested ways on how to proceed. More than 500 ideas were collected and assessed, creative approaches, practical suggestions for the more efficient realization of prevention measures and truly innovative ideas underlined, how much effort and thought the participants from all over the world had put into this conference – making it an exciting, successful event. More evaluation has to be done on the ideas, and a committee of experts will be set up to achieve a compendium. The results of the collection of ideas will be posted in a month from now on GRF's platform of networks. Further events, being set up at the moment and the ongoing activities of the Global Risk Forum GRF Davos, such as the Risk Academy, will be published on IDRC's website www.idrc.info continuously.

Concluding, it was pointed out that the increasing frequency of disasters is known, that the knowledge and the solutions are available and that conferences, such as the IDRC, are major platforms to bring together ideas, knowledge, needs and solutions to improve disaster prevention, mitigation and relief. Next year's regional IDRC will be held in Nairobi, hosted at the UNEP campus.

Post-conference events

A post-conference course, to be held on Friday and Saturday, is looking into the human factor in risk perception and communication, trying to take a cognitive perspective. A special symposium is going to explore innovative and sustainable approaches to improve the resilience of communities in disaster prevention and response.

This was the last of the daily press releases for this year's International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC 2008 in Davos. At the beginning of next week, a release will be published that gives a summary of the whole week. The next global IDRC will be held in Davos in 2010. Thank you for your interest, and if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail at anja.schilling@idrc.info or by phone on +41 79 564 87 56.