

69th ESCAP Commission Session

'Opportunities to build resilience to natural disasters and major economic crises'

Australia's Country Statement (29 April)

Suggested introduction

Executive-Secretary, Ministers and Distinguished Colleagues.

Firstly, Australia would like to thank Thailand for hosting this 69th session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and doing it with their customary blend of organisational excellence, warmth and generosity.

I would also like to thank Dr Noeleen Heyzer, for her tireless work in supporting member States of the Commission, and in ensuring ESCAP remains the peak regional organisation for the Asia-Pacific.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Context

- . This year's theme is of deep significance to us all
- . For all of us, memories of disasters, and the suffering and devastation they wreak, remain very fresh
- . The Asia-Pacific is the most disaster-prone region in the world
 - with many Asia-Pacific countries especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including drought, flood and extreme weather events.
 - In the Pacific alone, 480 million people live in earthquake risk areas, 200 million live in the vicinity of volcanos and 16 million live in tsunami and storm surge areas.
- . Recent reports tell us:
 - in 2011, disaster losses were estimated at \$380 billion, the costliest year on record;
 - more than 1.6 billion people have been affected by disaster in East Asia and the Pacific since 2000;
 - the vulnerability of Asia to flooding will increase, with an estimated 410 million urban people in Asia at risk of coastal flooding by 2025; and
 - the Pacific accounts for about 40 per cent of the total number of floods over the past 30 years.
- . Australia is by no means immune to disasters.
 - In the recent past we have experienced an extended drought, several severe floods, bushfires and tropical cyclones, which have taken lives and caused many millions of dollars worth of damage;
 - Australia has been able to weather these disastrous events relatively well
 - : But many countries in the Asia-Pacific have not been so fortunate.
 - : The Asia-Pacific, in addition to being disaster-prone, is also home to two-thirds of the world's poor – some 800 million people.
 - : Natural disasters disproportionately affect the poor, vulnerable and marginalised, especially women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities.
- . In addition to natural disasters, the Asia-Pacific has also had to cope with the shock of the global financial crisis and the slow, erratic recovery which followed
 - Soft demand from the developed world impacted on the growth of many export-led developing countries;

- The financial and commercial interconnections that previously had helped to lift so many out of poverty now saw vulnerable people affected by a crisis whose origins and causes were remote.
- Economic resilience and broader good governance are essential if the Asia-Pacific is to manage its natural disasters effectively, especially as those disasters become more common as a result of climate change
 - Integrating disaster risk reduction strategies into national macroeconomic frameworks is essential.

[Australia's record on disaster risk reduction assistance]

- This sounds like a grim story.
- But while the challenges to building resilience in the Asia-Pacific region are serious, they can be successfully overcome
 - Australia has substantial experience in disaster risk reduction in the region and will continue to work with Asia-Pacific countries to help save lives, prevent the loss of critical infrastructure and reduce the cost of responding to and rebuilding after disasters in our region.
- In 2011-2012, Australia channelled through its international aid program \$111 million in disaster risk reduction assistance to developing countries and international organisations
 - This represents 2.3 per cent of total Australian overseas development assistance for that period;
 - This is more than double the target recommended by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction of 1 per cent

: Australia is one of the few donors to not only meet this target, but to significantly exceed it.
- The majority of our assistance goes to the Asia-Pacific, where we have significant experience in supporting disaster reduction programs.
- Australia is working across this region to support governments to integrate disaster risk reduction, including through:
 - the Australia-Indonesia Facility for Disaster Reduction, a collaboration with the Indonesian government to develop innovative software that provides risk modelling capabilities to local government and communities;
 - the BRACE program in Metro Manila, which aims to build the resilience and capacity of poor communities in metropolitan Manila, and concentrates particularly on reducing flood risk; and
 - the new Pacific Risk Resilience Program, which combines economic and disaster risk resilience by working with central government agencies to incorporate DRR into national policies, plans and budgets.

Let me touch on climate change

- Donors are achieving significant results in the region in the area of disaster risk reduction, but the effects of climate change threaten to derail this progress
- The Asia-Pacific region, with its many small island states and low-lying, densely populated countries, is especially vulnerable to rising sea levels.
- In addition to serious environmental and economic impacts faced by the rest of the world, the very existence of some Asia-Pacific states is threatened.
- Even with good mitigation progress worldwide, damaging climate change is already unavoidable
 - so disaster risk management must now also include climate change adaptation initiatives, which must be fully mainstreamed into national development strategies.
- Australia is assisting vulnerable countries with adaptation, including through the \$599 million we have provided in fast-start funding.

- . In the Pacific region, Australia has provided a total of \$166 million to support climate change adaptation over five years (to 2013), including for projects that:
 - help Pacific partners better understand how the climate and oceans have changed, and how they may change in the future;
 - assist Pacific partners to assess their vulnerability to climate change and integrate this into their development planning; and
 - develop the capacity of scientists, decision-makers and planners to manage future climate risk.
- . Australia is committed to strong preventative action which could help stabilise the climate and halt the trend of increasing extreme weather.
- . Australia is active in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations for a legally binding agreement applicable to all, to come into effect by 2020
 - We are also working through the Cartagena Dialogue, (which includes several Asia-Pacific and small island states) to find common ground and move forward.

Now, a point on Global institutions

- . The role of global negotiations and institutions in increasing resilience is important not just for climate change, but across the whole spectrum of economic growth and sustainable development issues.
- . Australia was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council with a mandate to bring the views and interests of vulnerable countries, particularly in the Asia-Pacific, to the top table of the United Nations
 - We will honour that commitment, and encourage our permanent and non-permanent Security Council member colleagues in UNESCAP to similarly represent the interests of the region in their work in New York.
- . The work of the G20, particularly on improving international financial standards and international development cooperation and coordination, is also highly relevant to the region
 - Australia, as a member of the G20, is committed to consulting non-G20 member countries so that their views can be considered by the G20;
 - Australian Ministers and senior officials conduct regular outreach with our Asia-Pacific neighbours in particular, to ensure that the decisions of the G20 reflect the needs of this region.
- : And, given the importance we place on outreach, we thank, ESCAP for having convened last Saturday (27 April) the consultation on the forthcoming G20 Summit

Conclusion

- . The challenges facing the Asia-Pacific region as we aim to improve economic and disaster risk resilience and achieve sustainable development for all, are considerable;
 - But with the right mix of local, regional and global initiatives the challenges can be met.
- . ESCAP continues to provide an important forum for coordination and sharing experiences amongst Asia-Pacific countries
 - Australia looks forward to continuing to work with fellow member States, the Executive Secretary and the Secretariat, with a vision of transforming the Asia-Pacific from the most vulnerable to the most resilient region in the world.

Thank you.