Speech of Shri Shivraj Patil, Hon'ble Union Home Minister

Gen N.C.Vij Hon'ble Vice Chairperson National Disaster Management Authority, Shri E Ahamed Hon'ble Minister of State for External Affairs, Shri V K Duggal Home Secretary, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen.

It has given me immense pleasure to inaugurate the SAARC Disaster Management Centre today in the premises of this building just a few minutes back. Two years back, on 11th August 2004, I had the privilege to inaugurate the National Institute of Disaster Management, which is located in the upper floors of the same building. It is indeed gratifying that within a very short period the Institute has been able to make its mark and has been recognized as a centre for excellence to host the Disaster Management Centre for the South Asian region which is considered as one of the most critical disaster hotspots in the globe.

In the recent years the concept of disaster management is undergoing metamorphic changes throughout the world. Today management of disasters does not merely mean managing the consequences of disasters; it covers the entire cycle of disaster management starting from the pre-disaster issues of prevention, mitigation and preparedness, on-disaster issues of response,

relief, rehabilitation, and post-disaster issues of reconstruction and recovery. All these issues involve a range of disciplines - from earth sciences to atmospheric, environmental, engineering, agricultural, medical, social, behavioral and management sciences, remote sensing, information and communication technologies and so on. In each of these disciplines significant research work of fundamental importance are taking place in our country and elsewhere in South Asia and the world to reduce the risks of disasters and to ameliorate the sufferings of the people affected by disasters.

An Institute or a Centre for Disaster Management cannot be expected to duplicate such specialized research, which should better be left to the specialized disciplines. To my mind the task of a disaster management institute is somewhat more critical and more challenging – it is to network with all such specialized institutions, assemble all relevant information and knowledge from multiple disciplines, synthesize and manage them in actionable modules and capsules and further disseminate them to the practitioners in diverse fields and sectors through a continuous process of training and capacity building exercises at all levels. This requires the efforts of many specialists and also of generalists with live experiences from the field that can translate the information and knowledge into action on the ground to reduce the risks of disaster and to provide help and

assistance to those vulnerable people who deserve them the most.

I am happy that National Institute of Disaster Management has been able to gear itself into this challenging role within a short period through a sleek multi-disciplinary team and establish institutional linkages with as many as forty-seven research and academic organizations across the country and the globe and develop modules for practitioners in different fields, incorporating the latest tools and techniques.

It is gratifying to note that SAARC Disaster Management Centre has similarly adopted a strategy of networking with specialized institutions within each country, between countries of the region and among regions of the globe. The strategy of networking with the networks is particularly appealing to me. This has the advantage of granting maximum freedom and autonomy to each country to establish networking with specialized institutions within the country thus being able to pool together a vast reservoir of information and knowledge that is already available within each country. It has also the advantage of interlocking the specialized institutions of all the countries on a common platform for sharing knowledge, experiences, information and good practices for mutual benefit. Through this networking a common pool of south Asian

knowledge and wisdom on disaster risk reduction and management shall be developed which would be available to all of us and others to share for the benefit of everybody.

Creation of such a networking would have been a very difficult task a few years back. Thanks to the spectacular achievements of information and communication technologies such networking is possible within a very short period, if we have the commitment and zeal to do so. This would require the very active support and cooperation of each member country of the region. I am told that each country shall designate a National Focal Point and also appoint a National Focal Point Coordinator whose job would be to identify the specialized organizations and institutions that would be part of the networking. The next step would be to develop the protocol for sharing existing and new resources that would be part of the common pool of South Asian Knowledge on Disaster Management. The actual work would begin thereafter. I can anticipate this would involve very hard work of many professionals across he region, but I am sure we will be able to accomplish the task and develop a model, which would be worthy of emulation in other regions of the world.

Recent advances in the field of science and technology have opened up enormous possibilities for developing an efficient system of disaster risk reduction and management. It is possible

to prepare hazard, risk and vulnerability maps at a micro scale which can make the task of risk assessment and risk analysis much more accurate and fast. It is possible to integrate spatial data on a common platform and prepare scenario analysis on different disaster situations. It is now possible to track atmospheric depression and predict weather and climatic conditions at local levels with reasonable degree of accuracy. Similarly cyclonic storms can be tracked from the initial formation to its subsequent developments and early warnings can be issued to people living in vulnerable areas. The location of landfall, magnitude of storm surge and extent of inundation can be predicted through various modeling and simulation exercises. Satellite imageries can locate impending disasters in remote areas such as glacial outbursts or landslides. Similarly damages to housing and infrastructure can be assessed much more accurately and speedily. Disaster communication technologies have been perfected to achieve a hundred percent reliability level. These are but a few examples of how science and technology can make a huge difference to the situation. All these applications are taking place in different scale in different parts of South Asia. No doubt there are lots that countries of the region can learn from each other.

Here I would like a raise a word of caution. In our enthusiasm to apply the tools of modern science and technologies for better

management of disasters we must not loose sight of the fact that natural hazards had been part of human existence since the dawn of civilization. The communities have learnt to live with the disasters and in this process they have developed coping mechanisms that are based on accumulated local knowledge, experience and wisdom for centuries. Sometimes such traditional coping mechanisms were completely overtaken by the sheer magnitude of mega disasters that have devastated the communities but still communities have learnt to bounce back to their normal lives. I find that there are lots to learn from these resilience and coping mechanisms, which the communities in the hazardous zones have inherited as part of their socialization process. No amount of training or research could possibly implant the skills and wisdom that is transmitted from one generation to another through a natural process of living. There may be many weaknesses in such traditional wisdom, but I am sure you will all agree, there is much strength as well which must not be lost sight of and which must be harmonized with the modern practices. The greatest strengths of traditional mechanisms are that these are developed indigenously with locally available resources, are cost effective and can be easily adopted, adapted and replicated.

I have an apprehension that in our zeal to do everything new we tend to forget the traditional wisdom and in this process we are

not only losing a knowledge system which was internalized as part of our culture, we are also making the communities dependent on outside and in this process the continuity of traditional knowledge system is disrupted, a process which late environmentalist Mr. Anil Agarwal had described as *Dying Wisdom*. South Asia being one of the oldest civilizations in the world has a plenty of such dying wisdoms on disaster management, which need to be documented, revived and made part of out overall strategies of disaster risk reduction and management. There are lots which the countries of the region can do and learn from each other in this field. I am happy to note that documentation of traditional coping mechanism of the communities is one of the activities that the Centre would be engaged in the months to come.

I have been briefed about various other activities that the SAARC Disaster Management Centre shall be involved during the first year of its operation. These include training, research, capacity building and documentation. All these activities shall no doubt promote greater cooperation among the countries of the region on disaster risk reduction and management. But these activities alone would not be adequate to make South Asia resilient from natural and man made disasters. While each country of the region has to play its role as per its own legal and institutional arrangements new avenues of cooperation among

the countries of the region should be visualized and developed according to the felt needs of the region.

In this context I would like to make a mention about two recent initiatives which would open new vistas of cooperation among the countries of the region. The first is the South Asian Regional Framework of Disaster Management which has been developed by an Expert Group, endorsed by the SAARC Environment Ministers and would be formally adopted by the SAARC Summit of Heads of States and Governments in New Delhi early next year. This comprehensive framework, developed on the pattern of Hyogo Framework of Action adopted at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Japan in January 2005, would be very useful for the national governments in designing national policies and programmes of action, just as it would be the basis of developing new areas of regional cooperation for disaster risk reduction and management in South Asia.

The second initiative that I would like to mention is the Delhi Declaration which was adopted at the South Asian Policy Dialogue on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management at New Delhi on August 21-22, which I had the pleasure to inaugurate. The Declaration has called for the setting up of a South Asian Regional Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management involving all the stakeholders including the Government.

It has often been said disaster management is Everybody's Business since disaster affects everybody. Therefore everyone has a role to play in disaster risk reduction and management. The Regional Platform would facilitate the participation of all non-State actors like the media, corporate sector, scientific and research communities, NGOs and others to work for disaster risk reduction and management in the region.

Both the South Asian Regional Framework and the South Asian Regional Platform on Disaster Management shall demand a highly proactive and effective role from SAARC Disaster Management Centre. I am sure the Centre will work overtime to keep up to the expectations of the Member Countries and shall emerge as a vibrant centre for networking, research, training, documentation and become a virtual clearing house of all information on disaster management in this part of the world.

I wish the Centre all success.

Thanking you all.