

# Preparing for the worst

It is imperative to include disaster risk reduction in school curricula, writes ORAWAN YAFA

**S**addam Hossain grew up in Bangladesh listening to stories about storms and cyclones. In school, he learned from textbooks about how to stay safe when a natural disaster strikes. "When there is a warning about a cyclone, we take shelter immediately with our family," said the 14-year-old student.

In disaster-prone Bangladesh, schools play an important role in educating children about natural calamities and how to keep themselves safe. They also have life-saving equipment that can be distributed to people in the communities.

Baby Febri Kurnia, a 10-year-old student from Simeulue Island in Aceh, survived the December 26, 2004 tsunami, because everyone in her village had been taught by village elders about natural disasters like the tsunami. "The earth was trembling, and we all ran to high ground," she recalled.

But not everyone is as lucky as Hossain and Kurnia.

Nazanin Ramezanzadeh lost her father when an earthquake struck the Iranian city of Bam in 2003. "If we had prior earthquake drills or rescue equipment, many lives could have been saved," said the secondary school student. More than 26,000 people died in the quake.

The three students were among a group of young people who were in Bangkok on October 8-10, 2007 for the Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop on School Education and Disaster Risk Reduction, attended by more than 300 participants from all over the Asia-Pacific region.

Held at the United Nations Conference Centre, the workshop aimed to raise awareness on the need to integrate disaster risk reduction and school safety construction programmes into education curricula.

Mr Phongphayome Wasaphooti, the permanent secretary of the Thai Interior Ministry, noted that education is a starting point for the region to address the issue of climate change and its environmental consequences. "Children and teachers should know what to do and where to go when disaster comes, as they will also share their knowledge with



Students attending disaster workshop two weeks ago in Bangkok.

family members and respective communities," he said at the workshop.

Participating experts also called for political commitment in integrating disaster risk reduction (DRR) into school curricula.

Masakazu Goto, a senior researcher at the National Institute for Educational Policy Research in Japan, demonstrated an interesting earthquake simulation that tells children how earthquakes occur and how to act when there is one.

According to Mr Goto, students should have the ability to understand the mechanisms that cause natural disasters through science and geography studies. Teachers should also know how to deal with the issue. He added that the Japanese Ministry of Education has formulated a policy to facilitate disaster risk reduction in schools.

Ms Sararat Leepaiboon of the Office of Basic Education Commission of Thailand, said that by the end of this year Thai students will be taught in school to understand the interrelationship between science and geography. A teachers'

guide on how to prevent disasters in schools has already been prepared, she added.

Wilfred Perera, assistant director-general of the National Institute of Education in Sri Lanka, said school children should be prepared with mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual intelligence to be able to deal with disasters when they occur.