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STATEMENT

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Message from Sálvano Briceño, Director of the United Nations secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) on the Occasion of World Water Day 2008: Reduce Water-related Sanitation Risk by Implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action

Natural hazards such as floods, droughts, tsunamis, tropical cyclones, and earthquakes have the potential for causing massive harm to vital infrastructure. One of the most serious threats that face communities and nations directly after disasters is the disruption of access to safe water. This problem is particularly serious for developing countries, due to their higher levels of vulnerability.

Despite the efforts of humanitarian relief agencies following disasters, disaster victims are often forced to rely on contaminated water, frequently causing health problems. In tropical areas, malaria and dengue fever following floods are still problems. Enormous amounts of financial resources are invested in emergency relief activities, and these costs could be significantly reduced, and invested in development, if we reduce vulnerability of sanitation public works and programmes. Prevention is better than cure.

In January 2005, 168 governments met at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction to endorse the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), 2005-15, which stressed the importance of preventive measures to reduce disaster risk through multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels. In 2007, the multi-stakeholder Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction was established, with the active participation of governments. This high-level policy making process aims to highlight key disaster risk reduction issues and take action on them, including the linkages between water, sanitation, and disaster.

In particular, there are several new activities to implement the HFA in the area of water-related disasters. WMO and UNESCO (including UNESCO/ICHARM), supported by UNU and other agencies, launched the International Flood Initiative (IFI) in 2005, which functions as a thematic platform of the ISDR system, dedicated to reducing flood disaster risks.

The Japan Water Forum, Korea Water Forum, World Water Council, UN/ISDR secretariat and other key agencies with renowned experts in water-related disasters, convened the 'High-level Panel on Water and Disasters' in 2007, reporting to the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation. The Panel will identify key recommendations on reducing water-related disaster risks for the Fifth World Water Forum in Istanbul in March 2009.

Last but not least, the impacts of climate change have been worsening the situation by increasing the number of water-related disasters and their magnitude. In order to reduce such new risks, UN/ISDR secretariat strongly supported the development of the Bali Action Plan in 2007, stressing the importance of disaster risk reduction for climate change adaptation.