

VIEWPOINT: Save our schools should be Kobe's slogan

17 Jan 2005

Source: AlertNet

A Turkish mother mourns her son killed in a school building in Bingol, May 2003

File photo by JEAN-PAUL PELISSIER

Schools and hospitals should be given higher priority in disaster reduction, argues journalist Nick Cater.

Slack construction and loose laws can turn schools and hospitals into deathtraps when disasters strike, yet a major disaster reduction conference in Kobe does not seem to be paying them much attention.

Every year schools and hospitals hit the headlines when they are destroyed in disasters, collapsing on hundreds of patients or students.

Instead of sheltering survivors, they often end up claiming victims, usually because of poor architecture, construction and management.

Luckily, few health or education facilities are built very close to coasts, so the Asian tsunami of December 26 has allowed them to fulfil their usual positive disaster role as places of help and healing, treatment and shelter, information and coordination.

Those vital roles and significant risks mean the upcoming 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan, should consider how to make schools and hospitals a far higher priority for disaster prevention and preparedness.

Yet a draft of the conference's planned outcome document, titled "Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters", skips over the needs of education and healthcare.

In just a couple of catch-all paragraphs, the document pays lip service to the need to "protect and strengthen critical public facilities and physical infrastructure", from power plants to culturally important structures.

The Kobe summit comes 10 years after the 1994 World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction.

INTERNATIONAL DECADE

The United Nations designated the 1990s an International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, and held the conference in Yokohama, Japan.

The hope from Yokohama was that all of the world's governments would develop risk strategies to ensure that every one of their citizens was protected, including good construction and management of private and public buildings.

But with a long way to go for such hopes to be fulfilled and today's global realities of limited resources -- especially political will -- the case for defending schools and hospitals first is obvious.

These are also vital institutions for reaching the so-called Millennium Development Goals, which were agreed by world leaders at a summit in September 2000.

The timebound and measurable goals set targets for combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women.

Spending on risk reduction would help secure those goals in education and maternal and child health, a conclusion the British Department for International Development is likely to back in an imminent report.

A forthcoming book on earthquakes -- part of a series on hazards and disasters by publisher Routledge -- suggests that if the Millennium Goals are fulfilled and every child in the world goes to school, there needs to be parallel investment in making those schools safe.

Otherwise, it says, the growing numbers of children in education will translate into growing numbers of children at risk in seismically active zones.

NEW BOOK

This is the argument of U.S. hazards specialist Ben Wisner in "Earthquakes", edited by Christine Rodrigué and Eugenie Rovai, and due out at the end of February 2006.

The book also includes contributions by hazards specialists including British academic David Alexander and Nepalese earthquake scientist Amod Mani Dixit.

Wisner makes the point that schools and hospitals should always be priorities for disaster reduction and relief because they are full of the most vulnerable people - young people and those receiving treatment -- and are usually directly under government control.

An estimated 4,800 young deaths can be expected in schools hit by seismic shocks in the next decade.

Aid donors and recipients stand to save money if resources are put into low-cost protection measures -- making sure that improved building standards are fully implemented and improving existing structures -- rather than the sky-high costs of post-disaster reconstruction.

And they can easily be cheap and effective channels to improve understanding and awareness of disaster preparedness and build community response skills.

Worldwide, there are many efforts being made to ensure safe school building.

In Asia, there is Nepal's Kathmandu Valley Earthquake Risk Management programme.

The United Nations Centre for Regional Development's Earthquake Safety Initiative is in India, Indonesia, Nepal and Uzbekistan.

AROUND THE WORLD

In the Americas and the Caribbean, projects include the EDUPLAN Hemisferico and **Families for School Seismic Safety** in Canada's British Columbia province.

Both the Organisation of American States and the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) have pursued community-based initiatives to protect schools and health facilities.

And the region's health ministers, meeting with PAHO last year, agreed that governments should build or retrofit disaster-proof hospitals so they can continue operating even when a crisis affects the community around them.

An early version of Kobe's draft programme outcome document said: "Schools can play an important role, as a focus for local learning and participation, as a resource centre, and as a base for emergency action and community shelter.

"There are many existing training initiatives and educational programs in disaster reduction but there is a widespread lack of systematic standards and curricula."

Wisner, a disasters expert at the Benfield Grieg Hazard Research Centre at University College London, wants action.

In a contribution to the Earthquakes book, he reports progress in preparedness for schools in Algeria, Colombia, Iran, Italy, Macedonia, Nepal and Turkey, but says: "We need to build on these advances and push for a comprehensive approach to school safety."

Establishing a priority for preparedness in health centres and schools at the Kobe conference would mean governments accepting a significant responsibility in spending and standards.

Judging by the demands of citizens, politicians and the media after each tragedy, this would be a popular step.

As well as better meeting the needs of the most vulnerable, safer schools and health centres would be of significant practical value in any crisis, from protection to communications.

And progress in setting such a priority would be an example and a guide for further action to save more lives and livelihoods in future disasters.

(c) Copyright Nick Cater/Words & Pictures 2005