

UN warns of 'megadisasters' linked to climate change

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UN humanitarian chief John Holmes speaks during a press conference in Khartoum in May 2009. Some of the world's biggest cities are at growing risk of "megadisasters", the UN's humanitarian chief said Tuesday, warning that climate change was behind a rising number of natural catastrophes.

The United Nations on Tuesday raised the prospect of "megadisasters" affecting millions of people in some of the world's biggest cities unless more is done to heed the threat of climate change.

"We are going to see more disasters and more intense disasters as a result of climate change," UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes said at the opening of a four-day conference on reducing disaster risks.

The Red Cross joined the UN in urging more

investment to ensure that cities, villages and small communities were better prepared for natural disasters that are being amplified by global warming.

Natural and man-made disasters killed nearly a quarter of a million people in 2008 and warnings about looming disasters, particularly climate change, are not being heeded, the Red Cross said.

At 242,662 people worldwide, this was the second biggest annual toll of the past decade, according to a report by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Nine in 10 of those disasters were weather-related and they caused up to 200 billion dollars (145 billion euros) worth of damage, Holmes said, calling it an "enormous concern".

"The effects of climate change are being felt now, they're not simply some future threat."

Holmes said some of the world's biggest cities, housing more than 10 million people each, were highly exposed, since they were located in coastal areas that would be threatened by rising sea levels or in earthquake zones.

"The risks of megadisasters in some of these megacities are rising all the time," the UN relief chief warned, predicting a soaring death toll from future natural catastrophes.

The Red Cross cautioned that only piecemeal progress had been made on prevention and measures to make communities more resilient to floods, drought, storms and earthquakes, despite the warnings about more extreme weather events.

The federation's annual "World Disasters Report" published Tuesday highlighted climate change as "offering us the ultimate early warning."

"The rising dangers of [climate change](#) require a response from governments equivalent to the one made to address the global financial crisis," said Bekele Geleta, Secretary General of the federation.

But he warned in the report that there was "much resistance to change", with the focus still on emergency aid after the event rather than preparing for the worst.

"This seems to be a lesson that individuals, donors, countries and some of the 'humanitarian community' have yet to learn," Geleta said.

The measures advocated at the conference include adequate community flood or weather alerts, shelters, better building standards to resist bad weather or quakes, and avoiding settlements in high risk areas.

Holmes estimated that about three billion dollars a year could be mobilised by setting aside one percent of development assistance and 10 percent of global humanitarian aid for precautionary projects.

The 585 natural or man-made catastrophes that occurred in 2008 represented the lowest annual total the past decade.

The overwhelming majority of the deaths occurred in the Sichuan earthquake in China where more than 87,000 people died, and cyclone Nargis, which claimed more than 138,000 lives when it swept through coastal areas of Myanmar.

The Red Cross report likened forecasting the impact of global warming to rolling a dice: "We never know when a particular number will appear, but at some point every number comes up."

"Confronted with global warming and growing vulnerability, we also know the dice is loaded."

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