United Nations E/2000/SR.31

Economic and Social Council

Provisional
13 October 2000

Original: English

Substantive session of 2000
Humanitarian affairs segment

Provisional summary record of the 31st meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 19 July 2000, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. Sotirov (Vice-President) . . . . . (Bulgaria)

Contents

Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (*continued*)

Panel discussion on natural disasters

00-54173 (E)
~~~~~~~~~
~~~~~~~~~

In the absence of Mr. Wibisono (Indonesia), Mr. Sotirov (Bulgaria), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (*continued*) (A/54/855-E/2000/44; A/55/82-E/2000/61 and A/55/90-E/2000/81; E/2000/CRP.3, CRP.4 and CRP.5; E/2000/NGO/1)

Panel discussion on natural disasters

1. **The President** recalled that the theme of the humanitarian affairs segment of the current substantive session was "Strengthening the coordination of humanitarian response and the role of technology in mitigating the effects of natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies, including conflicts, with particular reference to the displacement of persons arising therefrom". The current panel discussion would focus on the role of technology in mitigating the effects of natural disasters. The Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP) would act as moderator of the discussion.

2. *A videotape produced by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), entitled "Myths and Realities of Natural Disasters", was shown.*

Introductory statement by Ms. Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme

3. **Ms. Bertini** (Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP)) said that the number of natural disasters had tripled between the 1960s and the 1990s and that 1998 and 1999 had been the worst two years on record in terms of significant natural disasters. That meant that the number of people at risk was higher than ever before, and the upward trend was expected to continue.

4. Too many people were unable to cope with natural disasters, often because of poverty. The actions taken by individuals to ensure their own survival after a natural disaster sometimes made them more vulnerable to future disasters. For example, migration to cities caused overpopulation problems that exacerbated the effects of natural disasters, and the indiscriminate cutting of timber led to soil erosion problems. Consequently, steps must be taken to support the long-term needs of such populations by ensuring the sustainability of their economies, resources and infrastructure. Currently, however, not enough resources were being devoted to the development of systems and infrastructure to help people cope with future natural disasters.

5. While the international community's response to such disasters had been prompt and generous, the coordination of that response was essential. The United Nations Resident Coordinator system played a key role in that regard. It was also necessary to pay more attention to the use of technology to mitigate the effects of natural disasters and to the incorporation of technological considerations into contingency planning and the management of the natural disaster response and preparedness system as a whole.

6. **Mr. de Casterle** (Resident Coordinator for Mozambique) said that some 500,000 people in Mozambique were still in need of humanitarian assistance. There was a definite need to make better use of technology in the management of natural disasters. Even in a country as poor as Mozambique, technology had made a significant difference and would make a difference in terms of preparedness for future disasters. Accordingly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had helped to equip Mozambique's National Institute for Disaster Management with basic information and communication (ICT) technology as a matter of priority.

7. Accessibility was a serious problem in countries like Mozambique, which did not always have the technology needed to speed up rescue operations. The deficiencies of Mozambique's mapping system had made it difficult for rescuers to locate remote villages engulfed by the floods, underscoring the importance of putting technology such as satellite imagery and mapping and meteorological forecasting systems in place before disasters struck.

8. The rescue and relief operation in Mozambique had been one of the largest in history, costing some $160 million. However, funds and technology served little purpose without adequate local human resources trained in the management of that technology. It was also vital to ensure the flow of information. Radios were a particularly important means of communication in Africa. In Mozambique, the wide use of inexpensive "Freeplay" radios, which needed no batteries and had been distributed free of charge to over 7,000 people,

had enabled disaster victims to receive information and instructions in their own language.

9. In terms of preparedness, better technology and trained human resources must be in place before disasters struck. Steps should also be taken to ensure the availability of radio frequencies and to relax import duties on equipment. Particular attention should be paid to regional capacity-building. His first-hand experience had convinced him that technology was an invaluable tool for assisting victims of natural disasters.

10. **Mr. Witschi-Cestari** (Resident Coordinator for Turkey) said that, although Turkey was a developing country, it had the resources, organization and experience to deal with natural disasters. Even so, recent events had shown that its use of technology was still insufficient. On 17 August 1999, an earthquake had struck an area which accounted for 37.9 per cent of Turkey's gross national product (GNP) and 25 per cent of its population. That area was one of the country's key academic, research and technological centres, and its technological capacity was comparable to that of developed countries.

11. For the first 48 hours after the earthquake, no clear overall picture of the situation could be obtained because normal communications had been disrupted, so that the country's technical capacity, which had been in need of updating, could not be used. Turkey's disaster management system involved the participation of many actors, including local governments at various levels, the international community, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. Since each of those actors had its own channels of communication and databases, they often produced different analyses of the same situation, indicating that the quality of communication systems and information management was essential. Turkey, in cooperation with the World Bank and other international agencies, was currently addressing those issues. All relevant actors must be linked to each other and to scientific and research centres capable of estimating the magnitude of a disaster in terms of the number of victims and the degree of damage.

12. Turkey now had the institutional capacity to prepare for and respond to disasters, but lacked appropriate linkage among those institutions. Likewise, it had the relevant technology, but that technology must be constantly updated and improved. The management of supplies was another area in need of attention. The Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN) was currently addressing the need for geographic information systems (GIS) and global positioning systems (GPS) to map the areas struck by natural disasters.

13. Turkey was upgrading its capacity to mitigate, address and monitor natural disasters. The World Bank had approved Turkey's Marmara Earthquake Emergency Recovery (MEER) programme, and it was being implemented with bilateral and multilateral support. It was worth noting that, when Turkey was struck by two more earthquakes in November 1999 and May 2000, it responded much more promptly and effectively than it had during the 17 August earthquake.

14. **Mr. Tichauer** (Resident Coordinator for Venezuela) said that in late 1999, days of heavy rain over the northern coast of Venezuela had triggered rock falls and mudslides which had devastated several inhabited regions, especially in the state of Vargas. About 30,000 people had disappeared or died. A major dam also collapsed in the interior, flooding surrounding land; and in the port of La Guaira, hazardous chemicals were found stored in a warehouse and had to be removed. Damage to the country's infrastructure had amounted to US$ 3.2 billion, representing 3 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, but 166 per cent of the income of the state of Vargas.

15. The Government had reacted swiftly to the disaster, and the armed forces had been able to rescue over 100,000 people. The United Nations system had also responded quickly, and press coverage had encouraged the flow of aid from abroad. The Government had set up an Emergency Commission, with representatives from the ministries of health, social development and foreign affairs. From the outset of the disaster, daily reports were sent to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to be passed on to aid donors and posted on its "ReliefWeb". The United Nations coordination system held periodic local meetings with the donor community, which reported to headquarters and established links with the appropriate government authorities.

16. A technical study was carried out by the United Nations team in the country to assess the damage resulting from the disaster. The findings of the study showed that similar events had in fact occurred before

but there had been no intervention, owing to the pace of growth in the affected areas. The socio-economic damage was evaluated by a method developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), following a meeting organized by the Inter-American Development Bank with the support of the Government of Spain. The result was a Web-based information management system, managed by OCHA and UNDP, providing information on the availability of aid and current needs, and on the actions of United Nations agencies. Through the Supply Management Project (SUMA), the World Health Organization and PAHO coordinated supplies of water and medicines. UNEP assessed the environmental damage and made recommendations. UNESCO, the World Meteorological Organization and the World Food Programme also played a role within the country. A total of about one million dollars in humanitarian aid had been channelled through OCHA, as well as US$ 45 million in bilateral assistance. A number of agencies and countries assisted in the rehabilitation and reconstruction process, including the Governments of Italy and Switzerland, the World Bank, the Inter-American Bank and the Corporacion Andino de Fomento, a subregional banking agency, which processed subregional loans. International non-governmental organizations also assisted local communities.

17. Certain lessons should be drawn from the disaster. First, both the United Nations system and national authorities must be prepared for contingencies. Second, adequate and timely information was essential in securing international cooperation. Third, logistics played a vital role in the flow of aid. Lastly, there was a need for a mitigation programme, ensuring preparedness for future disasters.

18. **Mr. Camacho** (Office of Outer Space Affairs) gave examples of how earth observation satellites could help to mitigate the effects of disasters. In disaster management, satellite imagery provided crucial information for decision makers. It could be used, for instance, to prepare maps representing hazards, and thus to make risk assessments and prepare appropriate legislation on land use, such as the building or otherwise of dams. It could provide data about volcanic eruptions and could identify areas prone to earthquakes, flash floods and landslides, and possible avenues for disaster relief. The data from satellite images supplied meteorological information for forecasting purposes and helped to build preparedness. Satellite positioning systems could measure the displacement of earth by a few millimetres, valuable information in relation to volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. The monitoring of water levels upstream of major rivers could provide early warnings of a flood emergency such as had happened in Mozambique. Satellite images helped to update maps, thus helping to distribute aid and indicating where conditions were likely to deteriorate. However, space technology must be approached like any other element of disaster management, on the basis of proper planning. Decision makers must know what information was forthcoming and who should receive it. The wrong decisions were taken in Mozambique because information was not available about water levels upstream. Such information could have been obtained from radar satellites. The question was, how much the international community was willing to pay for preventive measures.

19. **Mr. Recalde** (World Food Programme (WFP)) said that planning for disasters must begin at the development level by incorporating preventive measures into development planning for disaster-prone areas. The experience of WFP highlighted the critical importance of early response, before productive assets were sold and child malnutrition increased. However, it was difficult to mobilize funds before the signs of an emergency became clear. In southern Sudan in 1998, and in the Horn of Africa now, early warnings had not been heeded by the international community.

20. Like other agencies, WFP had used technology in responding to the Mozambique flood disaster, relying on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and remote sensing to calculate different levels of risk. It combined those calculations with population census data and its own estimates in order to target the people and areas most at risk. On the basis of forecasts, WFP and the Government of Mozambique had prepared a contingency plan for the province of Inhambane However, neither the contingency planning nor the early warning had succeeded in accelerating the donor response. Moreover, the scale of the emergency had been underestimated in spite of the risk analysis, and there was a need for improvement in that area. In five of its field offices in Mozambique, WFP had installed communications systems which enabled the offices to receive GIS data for logistics purposes while maintaining contact with the head office in Maputo.

Helicopters provided by South Africa to distribute relief supplies were supported by fundraising through WFP. During the emergency, WFP had worked in conjunction with an inter-agency team of specialists from UNHCR, FAO, OCHA, UNICEF and USAID, which had been exchanging information regularly since 1998.

21. Technology was about people and their environment. It had to be understood, both in its use and in its operation. Regional centres of excellence could be set up to apply technology to the particular needs and capacities of recipient nations. Developing disaster planning products before the event occurred would improve and facilitate the response. Information standards should be reinforced to support information sharing, and the information produced should lead to rapid response from donors and from the relevant agencies. Information systems should operate in an integrated environment in which trained personnel and procedures worked together.

22. **Mr. Maskrey** (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) said that the experiences of Mozambique, Turkey and Venezuela showed that there was a wide range of technologies, including remote sensing, GIS and communications technologies, that could facilitate information, communication and monitoring in emergency situations. However, it also showed that technology could not improve disaster preparedness without a supportive institutional and organizational environment and without the development of capacities to use such technology and apply the information it provided. Six key issues had emerged from the experience of UNDP in those two areas.

23. First, the information derived from remote sensing and GIS on natural hazards must be complemented by risk and vulnerability assessments in each country with a view to mitigating losses in the areas most likely to be affected. As the case of Turkey had shown, although such information might be available in a given country, it was often outdated and/or dispersed among different institutions. Second, steps must be taken to ensure that disaster information reached the users, including decision makers at all levels, in a readily understandable and usable form. Third, the compilation of time-series of geo-referenced data on disaster occurrence and loss, particularly for areas which experienced disasters periodically, would provide a powerful tool for generating risk scenarios. That exercise depended on good record-keeping rather than sophisticated technology, and should become a focus of national capacity-building efforts.

24. Fourth, the information provided by early warning systems should include information on the expected impact of natural disasters and instructions for the populations of the affected areas, and should be communicated in a timely fashion. Fifth, it was necessary to address individual countries' need for funds and trained human resources to update and maintain their disaster management technology. Sixth, since natural disasters had the greatest impact at the local level, capacity-building efforts should be strengthened at that level.

25. **Ms. Bertini** (Executive Director, World Food Programme), speaking as moderator of the panel, invited questions from the floor.

26. **Mr. Santos** (Observer for Mozambique) said that he was grateful to the President for organizing the panel discussion, which should help in finding ways of improving coordination in future. His country was still experiencing the effects of the tragic flood disaster. The Resident Coordinator had given an excellent presentation of the work of the United Nations system in Mozambique, alongside the Government, development partners and civil society. He emphasized the importance of building local capacity, not only in terms of equipment and technology, but also in terms of human resources, to help in speeding up assistance and in saving lives. He hoped that the discussions and subsequent action would be backed up by adequate resources.

27. **Mr. Backstrom** (Observer for Finland) commented on the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations. The Convention had been adopted by an intergovernmental conference organized by Finland, the International Telecommunication Union and OCHA in June 1998. Article 3 of the Convention (General Provisions) required States Parties to cooperate in deploying telecommunications resources in the event of disasters. Very few rescue operations could function without telecommunications. He urged signatory countries to ratify the Convention, and non-signatory countries to sign and ratify it. He asked the ITU how many signatures and ratifications the Convention had so far received.

28. **Mr. Páliz Dávila** (Observer for Ecuador) said that while natural disasters affected both developed and developing countries, the latter invariably suffered most. Technology was very important in preventing them, and so was science. Within the United Nations system, there were two complementary approaches to disaster management. One was the preventive approach, adopted as part of the strategy for sustainable development in the context of Agenda 21, when the 1990s were proclaimed the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. The other was the humanitarian approach, with which the agencies represented at the humanitarian segment of the Council's session were chiefly concerned. He asked how members of the panel perceived the interdisciplinary role of the United Nations system in supporting both approaches.

29. **Mr. Alessi** (Italy) said that there was considerable scope for taking action before a disaster actually struck. The international strategy for disaster reduction should ensure that information available in the region, as in southern Africa, was used at field level. Land use planning was particularly important in preventing disasters.

30. **Ms. Butschek** (Austria) said that the panel members had given some useful illustrations of action which could be taken to mitigate the effects of disasters. She asked them to elaborate on what could be done through intergovernmental liaison, and what was already being done.

31. **Mr. Figoli** (Venezuela) said that his delegation wished to thank the international community for the assistance provided to Venezuela over the past six months offering relief for the devastation wrought by mudslides, rock falls and floods. The emergency phase had ended, and the country now faced the challenge of reconstruction and rehabilitation of the affected area, which would take three or four years.

32. **Mr. de Goyet** (World Health Organization (WHO)) said that emergency response to natural disasters was basically a health issue, since the object was to save lives, and the health sector was no stranger to technology. The most important role of technology was to enable the health sector in disaster-prone countries to achieve permanent preparedness for disaster response. It was a matter of serious concern to the World Health Organization that the more disasters occurred, the less funding was available for disaster preparedness at the country level.

33. With regard to supply management technology, he stressed the importance of ensuring that the users and beneficiaries were the national and local authorities and health services. That principle was the basis of the success of supply management technology in the Latin American and Caribbean region and elsewhere. It enabled and empowered local health-care services and human resources, rather than widening the gap between local disaster responses and sophisticated technology-based external assistance.

34. **Mr. Price** (International Telecommunications Union (ITU)), in reply to an earlier query from the representative of Finland, said that the International Telecommunications Union was mandated by a resolution adopted in 1998 to cooperate closely with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and under the terms of its constitution, it was obligated to promote the adoption of measures for ensuring the safety of lives.

35. The Tampere Convention had been signed by 47 States, but regrettably only six had ratified it, which was 20 per cent of the number required for its entry into force. Pursuant to article 12(1) of the Convention, it would remain open for signature at United Nations Headquarters in New York until 21 June 2003.

36. **Mr. Tichauer** (Resident Coordinator for Venezuela), in reply to the question asked by the representative of Italy, said that land-use planning was indeed a key element in most of the rehabilitation and reconstruction activities being conducted in Venezuela. Considerable know-how and institutional capacities had been demonstrated in the country following the recent natural disaster. The salvage and rescue operation, relocating more than 100,000 people to places of safety in only 10 days, had been a remarkable feat. Also, a locally developed system for the management of cooperation, developed by young professionals in Venezuela, had been made available to the international community.

37. **Mr. Witschi-Cestari** (Resident Coordinator for Turkey) said that caring for the more than 6 million people who had been directly traumatized by the earthquake in Turkey was a key priority; for cultural reasons, the country did not have very much capacity in the area of counselling.

38. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) had been and was still involved, together with the Turkish Ministry of Health, local authorities and non-governmental organizations, in a programme to care for children who had been traumatized. The United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, with support from the European Union, had been working on a similar programme focusing more on adults. One issue in that regard was how to ensure sustainability, since dealing with psychological trauma in such situations was a long-term undertaking which had not so far been addressed and would require considerable additional efforts.

39. **Mr. de Casterle** (Resident Coordinator for Mozambique), in reply to an earlier question from the representative of Italy regarding the recent disaster in Mozambique, said that the damage had been estimated at $250 million but that the Government had evaluated the cost of reconstruction at $450 million. The reason for the discrepancy was that the Government, acting on advice from the international community and taking account of the lessons learned from the disaster, had decided to "rebuild differently", by removing population from certain high-risk areas, for example. For their part, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Food Programme and other bodies were working to improve local disaster preparedness capacities.

40. The authorities in Mozambique would have been able to react much better to the disaster if they had received more information from neighbouring countries, since most of the rivers that flowed through Mozambique into the Indian Ocean originated in those countries. There was a clear need for better river-basin management at the regional level, and the member States of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) had begun discussions on joint action to cope with that problem.

41. **Mr. Ricalde** (World Food Programme (WFP)) said that most specialized units had responsibilities to their own agencies, and additional capacity would be needed if they were to be able to extend their response to the wider community in the country. Also, as an emergency developed, information came in so great a magnitude and with such increasing speed that those who had to process it, including government units, were often quickly overwhelmed; there was therefore a need to improve capacities in that regard.

42. It was critical that the units concerned should maintain and update data on the Ministries and agencies engaged in disaster relief in an organized fashion. One common standard that was under consideration was the Geographic Information System (GIS).

43. **Mr. Maskrey** (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) said that although improved technology was useful, the international community should not overlook the need to invest in decision-making and disaster preparedness structures, human resources and capacity-building, all of which made it possible to make use of improved information in order to reduce risks. It was also important to help countries to decide which technologies were appropriate for their needs.

44. **Mr. Camacho** (Office of Outer Space Affairs) said that the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space had agreed that its Scientific and Technical Subcommittee would, for the next three years, be addressing the establishment of a global disaster management system using satellite technology. It would be largely a matter of coordinating capacity-building and information among bodies which were already working in that area, and of promoting awareness at the level of national authorities.

45. **Mr. Parmer** (United States of America) welcomed the focus on local decision-making reflected in the discussions; it was indeed at the local level that technological tools could most effectively be used in disaster prevention, response and mitigation. Disaster managers with experience on the ground should be involved in the development of those tools.

46. His Government was working with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on a tool known as the Global Disaster Information Network, which had been successfully used in the context of the recent disasters in Turkey and Mozambique.

47. **Mr. Agudelo** (Colombia) said that "natural disasters" could in fact be considered as events caused by human behaviour. It therefore followed that a high priority should be given to disaster mitigation, not only in order to diminish the impact of disasters, but also to deal with the factors which made people vulnerable, which could be physical, structural, economic, cultural or social. It was essential to focus on analysis of the risk factors and measures to reduce them, rather than on disasters themselves. The ultimate aim should be to

deal with those factors in such a way as to make disasters "illegal". He hoped that the members of the panel could provide some guidance on how the concept of sustainability could be defined in such a way as to take into account vulnerability as well as purely economic aspects.

48. **Ms. Bertini** (Executive Director of the World Food Programme), speaking as moderator, said that the representative of Ecuador's question did not seem to have been answered and invited him to repeat it.

49. **Mr. Páliz Dávila** (Observer for Ecuador) asked the panellists to give concrete examples of how the United Nations system could help improve natural disaster prevention, mitigation and response.

50. **Mr. Krishnamurty** (International Labour Organization (ILO)) said that technological advances were offset by an increase in the number and severity of natural disasters. Relief and reconstruction must be genuinely safe and durable. He therefore asked the panel to comment on the need to relocate economic activity and infrastructures to safer sites and to set new, improved safety standards for reconstruction, ideally without the massive substitution of capital for labour.

51. **Mr. Mazhukhou** (Belarus) said that even countries that were not affected by natural disasters suffered from floods, droughts and other seasonal anomalies. In many cases, global mechanisms did not have to be activated; regional cooperation could provide the needed backup to domestic efforts.

52. Furthermore, he asked the representative of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) when the Tampere Convention would be available in Russian so that Governments like his own could consider becoming parties.

53. **Mr. Lompo** (Burkina Faso) said that his Government had established an emergency response and reconstruction plan for disaster relief at the national level and with its partners and stressed the need for early warning mechanisms and technology. His Government had organized a subregional workshop on the prediction of seasonal anomalies in West Africa. States with fragile ecosystems especially required such information in order to inform the inhabitants of vulnerable areas and prevent population displacement into regions likely to be affected. He asked the panellists to comment on ways of improving cooperation with a view to the establishment of a subregional disaster prediction and response mechanism.

54. **Mr. Parmer** (United States of America) said that disaster mitigation was far less expensive than disaster response. Some years previously, in the wake of a major forest fire in Mendocino, California, government and private satellite images, historical data and information gathered in the field had been used to determine what to plant in order to prevent entire towns from being washed away in mudslides during the winter rains. The total savings had amounted to about US$ 250 million. A similar approach in the developing world could make a tremendous difference in reducing the costs of natural disasters.

55. He stressed the need for remote sensing and the Geographical Information System (GIS) as planning tools, for example, to prevent populations from moving into disaster-prone regions. In that connection, he drew attention to upcoming conferences on the subject to be held in October 2000 in Hawaii, March 2001 in Australia and May 2001 in San Diego.

56. **Mr. Huang Xueqi** (China) said that since States had the primary responsibility for mitigating the effects of natural disasters, Governments required assistance with capacity-building in order to improve institutional coordination for early warning and disaster prevention. Relief must be based on an analysis of the root causes of natural disasters; while technology was not a panacea, it should be used wherever possible in the search for a permanent solution.

57. **Mr. Alfeld** (Observer for South Africa) said that the one positive consequence of the growing number of natural disasters was the increased attention focused on that problem through discussions in bodies such as the Council.

58. Institutional response must be effective and sustainable and must reflect the needs of the regions concerned. He joined the representative of Mozambique in expressing his appreciation for the rapid response after the recent flood in their region and, in particular, for United Nations support for efforts to develop a disaster management mechanism. He hoped that the assistance provided as a result of the ongoing needs assessment mission in the area would include disaster prevention and reduction and community-based vulnerability strategies.

59. In the light of recent experience, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) believed that a coordinated approach by the United Nations system was imperative. If the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) had enjoyed the necessary independence, maintained its distinct character and benefited from the involvement of other agencies, it would have given countries of the region a multisectoral, interdisciplinary platform for capacity-building. Those countries were increasingly concerned about the composition of the ISDR Inter-Agency Task Force and the delay in holding its first meeting; the lack of continuity owing to the loss of the entire core professional staff of ISDR; and the resulting donor reluctance and mushrooming of other platforms through institutional turf battles in which developing countries were the prime losers.

60. At present, ISDR appeared to exist on paper only, and he feared that the scheduled one-year review of the implementation of General Assembly resolution 54/219 would be too late to make a difference. He therefore requested that the Emergency Relief Coordinator or the Disaster Relief Branch of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should hold an informal briefing on the matter during the Council's current session.

61. **Ms. Bertini** (Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP)) commended the South African air force for its courage in rescuing victims of the recent flood in Mozambique.

62. **Mr. Price** (International Telecommunications Union (ITU)) informed the representative of Belarus that the Tampere Convention had been issued in English, French and Spanish, the working languages of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). Article 17 of that instrument stated that the depositary (the Secretary-General of the United Nations) would prepare the Arabic, Chinese and Russian texts of the Convention as soon as possible.

63. **Mr. Mountain** (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)) said that the representative of South Africa had rightly noted that progress in the establishment of ISDR had been slower than anticipated. He would consult with the Emergency Relief Coordinator regarding the possibility of holding a briefing on the matter.

64. When natural disasters struck, speed was essential and both information and financial resources must be available on the ground immediately; capacities and needs must be assessed, delivery of supplies tracked and the impact of assistance evaluated. Both personnel and technology were vital. United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams worked with a variety of countries and agencies. Satellite imagery was vital. He commended the Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN) and stressed the need for an improved information database. OCHA and WFP were working on a project in that area. Cooperation with the private sector was important, particularly at field level; OCHA also worked with national military and civilian defence units.

65. **Mr. Maskrey** (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) said that he agreed with the representative of Colombia regarding the need for risk assessment and the importance of giving a local dimension to disaster relief. As the representative of Ecuador had noted, local authorities must be trained in natural disaster prevention, mitigation and recovery. In addition, the representative of Burkina Faso had rightly stressed the value of regional coordination efforts.

66. **Ms. Bertini** (Executive Director of the World Food Programme), speaking as moderator, invited panellists to reply in detail to the question raised by the representative of Ecuador.

67. **Mr. Recalde** (World Food Programme) said that the humanitarian and environmental approaches to natural disasters must be linked. The representative of Ecuador's question had been similar to that of the representative of South Africa, and the reply given by the representative of OCHA could apply to both.

68. **Ms. Bertini** (Executive Director of the World Food Programme), speaking as moderator, summarized the discussion. Disaster mitigation, planning and preparedness were critical and, in some cases, more important than disaster response. Coordination between governments, ministries, United Nations agencies, donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was essential; in particular, financial assistance must be provided quickly, tailored to the requests of the countries concerned and sustained beyond the initial disasters in order to prevent their recurrence.

69. Training was essential at all levels and technological and research capacities must be continually renewed. Regional coordination was also important. Technical capacity-building should be provided, but only where it was appropriate,

understood, usable, accessible, compatible and coordinated. Effective information management was the key to making the necessary information available in a timely fashion; it was therefore essential to ensure the use of common standards.

70. Lastly, Governments must incorporate capacity-building and other disaster prevention, mitigation and response strategies into their national priorities and budgets.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.