

OPENING REMARKS
AT THE LAUNCH OF THE WORLD DISASTER REDUCTION CAMPAIGN
FEB 3, 2008

“Hospitals Safe from Disasters”

On behalf of the World Health Organization, Regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean, I would like to welcome you to the launch of the ISDR – WHO World Disaster Reduction Campaign for 2008-09.

WHO is pleased that the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction has selected **Hospitals Safe from Disasters** as the theme for the current World Campaign, which was launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on 25 January. As the ISDR’s main partner in health, WHO will contribute with regional expertise of a broad range of public health and disaster management experts to focus global and regional attention on protecting critical infrastructure in the health sector.

However, it is important that I clarify the concept of safe hospitals from disasters. By “hospitals,” we are referring to **ALL** health facilities—large or small; tertiary reference hospitals or primary health care clinics; whether located in an urban or rural setting and whether private or public.

Some may ask: *Why focus on hospitals and health facilities?* Health facilities and health services are a community’s lifeline in normal times, and this is especially true in times of crisis. Yet many health facilities have been severely damaged or, at the very least, left unable to function in disaster and emergency situations. There are countless examples from this Region: Pakistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Somalia and Iraq, to mention a few—where the health system has suffered this fate.

The impact of the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan illustrates the burden on the health sector. There were 796 health facilities — ranging from sophisticated hospitals to small rural clinics —operating in the affected area. Of that number, 388 (almost 50 per cent) were completely destroyed. Thirteen of the destroyed facilities were hospitals, and four of these were regional or district referral hospitals. An additional 106 primary health clinics and

50 dispensaries were completely lost — and often these were the only sources of health care within a five-hour walking distance in the affected rural areas. The remaining facilities that were able to continue functioning were overwhelmed. And, in addition to physical damage to health facilities, the health sector itself was adversely affected, as many health professionals suffered direct losses, or worse, lost their lives.

Hospitals Safe from Disasters is about *preparing* our health facilities **and** the health workforce to cope with emergency situations so as not to disrupt the delivery of health care and services in the event of an emergency. WHO is already working with Member States in a number of important areas to better prepare the health sector to deal with major emergency situations. On the infrastructure side, this has included assessing existing natural hazards that could affect a health facility's ability to function; evaluating the proposed site and design for new facilities and evaluating the vulnerability of existing facilities. On the human resources side, a substantial investment has been and must continue to be made in preparing the health workforce to deal with these situations through training in areas such as contingency planning, mass casualty management, emergency care and more. Our health professionals, which includes doctors, nurses, epidemiologists, mental health experts and other allied health personnel can make the difference between a health facility that continues to function in emergencies and disasters and one that fails..

Reducing risk in health facilities *is* achievable and there are signs of progress. At the global level, it is increasingly common to find the topic on national, regional and international health agendas. International organizations have endorsed resolutions to intensify support to Member States affected by crises and disasters. WHO will work closely with the ISDR and other integral partners to improve multisectoral collaboration in health risk reduction, particularly in addressing the resilience and risk-management capacity of the health system, including health workers.

Today we know that with current knowledge, existing resources, **and a strong political commitment**, it is possible to reduce the impact of disasters, emergencies and health crises on hospitals and health facilities. WHO stands committed to the goal of the 2008-09 World Disaster Reduction Campaign, and to the challenge set forth in the Hyogo Framework of Action, *to ensure that all new hospitals are built with a level of resilience that strengthens their capacity to remain functional in disaster situations.* We cannot let pass the opportunity to draw

attention to the importance of safeguarding our critical investment in health, which ultimately will contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.