As UN steps up aid efforts, Ban promises ‘necessary action’ to assist cyclone-hit Vanuatu

16 March - With United Nations relief agencies stepping up their response in Vanuatu after the country was hit by Cyclone Pam, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today that the event “tragically underscored” the importance of global efforts on disaster risk reduction.

“I have instructed to dispatch immediately an assistance team to Vanuatu,” Mr. Ban said during a UN University symposium on the 70th anniversary of the UN, held in Tokyo. “We will take necessary action to mobilize humanitarian assistance to these Vanuatu people.”

Mr. Ban and other top UN officials are in Japan for the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, which is taking place in Sendai through 18 March. Thousands of participants have gathered in the Japanese city to agree on a new framework for managing disaster risk which will reduce mortality and curb economic losses.

The President of the Economic and Social Council, Martin Sajdik (Austria), issued a statement in which he noted that the full extent of the damage remains under review, and that reports from the UN and aid agencies confirm that people lost their lives and thousands are homeless after the cyclone.

“Cyclone Pam is an urgent reminder that disaster risk reduction must be part of national, regional and global development strategies,” said Mr. Sajdik, underscoring the importance of addressing the immediate crisis but also thinking of the medium and long term.
“Vanuatu is now facing a major humanitarian emergency,” he said. “There is no time to lose. We, the international community, governments, civil society, the private sector and individual citizens, all have a role to play. We must take action now!”

Meanwhile, UN agencies outlined the intensification of their efforts to respond to the needs of communities affected by the cyclone, which hit Vanuatu with winds of more than 250 kilometres per hour and one-metre storm surges on 13 and 14 March.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in the Western Pacific Region is coordinating response to the devastation with Vanuatu's Ministry of Health and other humanitarian organisations to bring much-needed health support to the Pacific nation.

“We are working closely with our partners to get the people of Vanuatu what they need as quickly as possible to respond to this devastating cyclone,” said Dr. Shin Young-soo, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific. “We have activated our emergency operations centre and put a support team in place to assess needs and deploy critical resources to help in the response.”

WHO is sending health and emergency response experts with supplies to Vanuatu and communicating closely with the Governments of Australia and New Zealand, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and other organizations to ensure Vanuatu gets the right resources to meet their health needs.

UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP) and other partners are working with the National Disaster Management Office in Vanuatu to set up and run emergency logistics hubs to assure the smooth flow of humanitarian supplies. Deaths and serious injuries have been reported, as well as the destruction of homes and restricted access to health services, food and clean water in many places.

Response efforts are complicated by damage to infrastructure, like roads and bridges, caused by the storm, while, electricity is out in many places and phones and Internet systems are down or are unreliable. The extent of the damage continues to be assessed.

UNICEF said that it has dispatched additional life-saving supplies for affected communities from its Pacific regional warehouse in Suva, Fiji, to add to emergency supplies pre-positioned in Vanuatu which it is already distributing.

“The supplies have been packed today and will be airlifted to Vanuatu tomorrow,” UNICEF Pacific Deputy Representative Isabelle Austin said. “Digicel provided a free airlift and volunteers helped pack the supplies through the night at a warehouse in Suva.”

Ms. Austin said supplies included health, education, child protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) supplies.

Five basic health kits are being shipped, each of which covers 10,000 patients, along with 1,508 school backpacks with stationery supplies. The supplies are intended to respond to immediate needs and to address serious concerns about risks to children’s and families’ health and hygiene, as well as children’s learning and psycho-social needs. They are being moved to Vanuatu as Government and humanitarian partners begin comprehensive assessments that will almost certainly find extensive additional needs outside the capital of Port Vila and on other islands.

Vanuatu’s international airport – Bauerfield International airport – will reopen for commercial flights on 17 March and several ships carrying relief items departed for Vanuatu from Fiji today, UNICEF reported.
Sendai: Early warning saves lives, but communities need targeted, useful information

16 March - When disaster strikes, the surest way to save more lives is to get targeted, practical information quickly out to communities, United Nations experts told delegations gathered in Sendai, Japan, but stressed that even the most technically impressive systems “are useless” if people are not reached or do not understand the warning.

Throughout several events at the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, running in Sendai through Wednesday 18 March, UN experts, Government and civil society officials spotlighted the essential need for effective early warning systems to raise risk awareness, ensure proactive preventive action to help communities reduce, if not prevent, loss of lives and property.

The Executive Secretary of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Intergovernmental Ocean Committee, Vladimir Ryabinin, said that early warning set-ups had to provide information that is usable and used.

“Even the most advanced systems in the world are useless if people do not respond to the warning.” Mr. Ryabinin told participants at the Conference’s ‘Lessons from Mega-Disasters’ session. “People need to know what to do in the event of a tsunami. We need to educate people. Japan provides an excellent example in this.”

The Director-General of the Japan Meteorological Agency, Noritake Nishide, expanded on the Japanese approach and how early warning had improved since the 2011 earthquake that heavily impacted Sendai and surrounding areas. More accurate seismology monitors have been installed, key partnerships have been strengthened, and better communication of key information to at-risk populations has been established.

Three factors have been crucial to this better preparedness: first, the issuing of daily earthquake information sensitizes and increases the awareness of the population; second, holding regular disaster scenarios – including real-time evaluations – to increase preparedness; and third, greater adoption of a multi-hazard approach to disaster resilience.

Experience from Chile after the country’s massive earthquake in February 2010 had also revealed the need for a more resilient communications system and better links with technical agencies. The Deputy Director of Chile’s Port Works Division Ministry of Public Works, Eduardo Mesina, said these were two of the biggest priority areas identified.

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) also announced today plans to support governments and others in developing multi-hazard early warning systems that provide a coordinated platform for managing multiple risks.

“Fortunately we have the knowledge and tools we need to prepare for and reduce these risks. Effective disaster response requires political leadership to ensure investments in preparedness and prevention combined with weather forecasts, warnings, media reports, emergency response, health facilities, and recovery plans,” said Michel Jarraud, WMO Secretary-General.

WMO is also working with its Members to develop “impact-based warnings” that describe a predicted event’s physical impacts and recommend specific precautionary actions.

One of the world's first multi-hazard early warning systems has been established in Shanghai, a mega city of over 23 million people. This systems delivers alerts on tropical cyclones, storm surges, and extreme temperatures, as well as on floods, diseases, physical damage and other resulting impacts.
At Security Council, UN envoy cites renewed hope for Afghan peace process

16 March - The top United Nations envoy for Afghanistan today said there was renewed hope for the peace process as he briefed the Security Council, which extended the mandate of the UN mission in the country for another year.

By a resolution adopted unanimously by the 15-member Council, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) will remain in the country until 17 March 2016 to lead and coordinate international civilian efforts there. The Council took that action while taking into account the completion of the transition process in Afghanistan and the initiation of the Transformation Decade (2015-2024).

In his briefing to the Council, Nicholas Haysom, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of UNAMA, pointed to a number of “significant developments” that had brought renewed hope for an active peace process, including the formation of a National Unity Government, together with constructive dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“These positive developments are testament to the efforts of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah,” he said. “Their collaborative leadership will remain essential for any peace talks to progress, for comprehensive electoral reforms to take hold, and for the implementation of the changes required to reinvigorate the economy.”

Mr. Haysom urged political leaders to conclude the appointment of senior Government officials and to strengthen efforts to reinforce the rule of law and the fight against corruption. He also noted the recent reports of possible peace talks between the Government and the Taliban.

“There is currently an alignment of circumstances that could be conducive to build a level of trust that will allow them to establish common ground,” he said, hoping parties can “come to the realisation that peace is the only viable option for Afghanistan, and that a military victory is neither likely, nor optimal for a lasting national social compact.”

The peace process was likely to remain “fragile and vulnerable to external destabilisation,” he warned. Mr. Haysom called for coherent and coordinated international support while pointing to the continued “frank dialogue” between UNAMA and the Taliban on humanitarian access and on human rights, notably the protection of civilians.

A key part of the political agreement that led to formation of the National Unity Government was the pledge to establish an Electoral Reform Commission, and he welcomed President Ghani’s commitment to comprehensive reforms, which he said were essential to restoring the faith of the Afghan people in the democratic process and strengthening political stability.

Mr. Haysom also underlined the importance of regional cooperation and of proper intra-Afghan peace dialogue, which he said would require strong regional backing, and noted that the country’s economy remained a “significant concern,” with support needed for implementation of the Government’s Self-Reliance agenda.

He re-stated concerns about civilian casualties and noted persistent high levels of torture and ill-treatment of conflict-related detainees in Government detention facilities but added that recent military operations in Helmand and Kunar provinces demonstrated that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) had improved their planning and operational capacity.

“They are now in a position to conduct large-scale operations without direct combat assistance from international military forces,” he said. “This development is encouraging even though we expect to see an intensification of combat in the upcoming fighting season as insurgents seek to test the ANSF capacity to hold ground on their own.”
Women’s participation in sports key to boosting gender equality – UN

16 March - The greater participation of women and girls in sports can help lift their involvement in society, fight gender stereotypes and accelerate progress towards gender parity, the head of the United Nations entity for gender equality and women’s empowerment declared today.

“Gender equality and women’s empowerment has been a marathon,” UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka told a gathering at UN Headquarters. “But I hope we’re in sight of the finish line so everybody has to be a sprinter now.”

The event – entitled ‘Looking ahead: the place of sport for women’s empowerment post-2015’ and held on the margins of the ongoing 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) – underscored sports’ multidimensional role in enhancing women’s broader community engagement.

Sports programmes, the UN Women chief noted, can both fill gaps in basic nutrition and health care, bring together those who would otherwise be isolated, and tackle head-on the ever-present scourge of gender-based violence by dismantling the stereotypes of women as less capable than men.

Panellist and Olympic ice skating champion Michelle Kwan agreed, telling those in attendance that the inclusion of women in athletic activities was “not about giving a girl a ball with which to play, but about giving a girl a chance to dream.”

“When women and girls are fully able to participate in a society, all women and girls have the equal opportunity,” Ms. Kwan said.

At the same time, speaking on the merits of sports education for young girls, Werner Obermeyer, Deputy Executive Director of the UN World Health Organization (WHO), explained that team sports offered a host of physical and mental benefits for female children as it helped them build social networks and learn the “whole ethos of working together as a team.”

Beyond that, he added, athletic activities helped keep obesity levels in women down, reducing the overall costs to the health sector and the economy which otherwise would be “astronomical.”

“Through engaging in sport and living its values, women and girls can develop leadership skills, overcome bias, improve their health and become empowered,” Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka continued. “We insist that sports must feature in the post-2015 development agenda that Heads of State and Government will adopt this coming September.”
Eritrea: UN-mandated inquiry finds ‘very clear patterns’ of human rights abuses

16 March - A four-month United Nations investigation into the human rights situation in Eritrea has found “very clear patterns” of violations and abuses, according to a report delivered today at the Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva.

“Most Eritreans have no hope for their future,” said Mike Smith, Chair of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, which despite not being granted permission to visit Eritrea, collected testimony from more than 500 members of the Eritrean diaspora.

Presenting the Commission’s interim report, Council, Mr. Smith said that in Eritrea national service is universal and of an indefinite duration. From the age of 17, Eritreans could expect to spend their lives in national service, struggling to live on less than two dollars a day.

Meanwhile, the Government has curtailed basic freedoms to the extent that, “individuals feel that they have hardly any choice with regard to the main decisions in their lives: where to live, what career to pursue, when to marry or who to worship,” he noted in a news release on the report.

For Eritreans, Mr. Smith said, “detention is an ordinary fact of life, experienced by an inordinate number of individuals – men and women, old and young, including children.” Detention centres range from official to the unofficial, located above ground or underground. Some have metal containers where prisoners are kept in extreme heat.

“Once in one of them, there is a likelihood that you will be subject to torture to extract a confession or to simply punish behaviours,” he added.

Torture is widespread, both in detention and during national service. Some Eritreans interviewed by the Commission had been beaten or tortured simply for asking for medicine, or for drinking water without permission.

Mr. Smith pointed out that these violations take place against a backdrop of the so-called “no war, no peace” situation related to Eritrea’s unresolved border issues with neighbouring countries.

“This has become the pretext for almost all the State’s actions that generate and perpetuate human rights violations in the country,” he said. “It is an expression abusively used by the Eritrean authorities to disregard international human rights law.”

Under this pretext, the entire society has been militarised, the Constitution has never been implemented and there is no rule of law, according to the news release, which added that no one was being held accountable for human rights violations.

The Commission of Inquiry, established by the Human Rights Council, is examining a broad range of alleged violations since Eritrea gained independence. It will present a written report of its findings to the Council in June 2015.
#HappySoundsLike: UN launches social media campaign to create world’s happiest playlist

16 March - Does happiness have a sound? And, if so, what does it actually sound like?

That is the question the United Nations is asking as it launches its latest campaign – #HappySoundsLike – an appeal for the global citizenry “to nominate a song that brings a smile to your face” ahead of this year’s International Day of Happiness, observed annually on 20 March.

Spearheading the effort, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s video contribution urges viewers around the world to ‘Be happy!’ in the UN’s six official languages and join the Organization’s call for people to demonstrate their solidarity with those “facing tough challenges.”

“On this day we are using the universal language of music to show solidarity with the millions of people around the world suffering from poverty, human rights abuses, humanitarian crises and the effects of environmental degradation and climate change,” he stated in a news release.

The campaign, made possible with the support of global music streaming service MixRadio, seeks to seize the power of music and “inspire hope for a better tomorrow” as it encourages people to suggest songs that best represent the feeling of happiness.

Mr. Ban nominated his Messenger of Peace Stevie Wonder's song “Signed, Sealed, Delivered” to the playlist, adding that to him #happysoundslike a new climate deal and agreed set of sustainable development goals, both on the agenda of world leaders for later this year.

Celebrity advocates including Charlize Theron, Lang Lang, Michael Douglas, Angelique Kidjo, along with internationally-acclaimed artists such as James Blunt, Idris Elba, David Guetta, John Legend, Cody Simpson and Pharrell Williams, will also contribute to create the world’s happiest playlist, which will be launched on 20 March.

Jyrki Rosenberg, Head of MixRadio, said the music service is privileged to support the UN for this campaign. “We hope the general public follow in the steps of the array of global stars and share the track that makes them happiest.”

In April 2012, the UN held a high-level meeting on “Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm” at the initiative of Bhutan, a country which recognized the supremacy of national happiness over national income since the early 1970s and famously adopted the goal of Gross National Happiness over Gross National Product (GDP).

This year will mark the third observance of the International Day of Happiness, which recognizes the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in people’s lives and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives.
INTERVIEW: Gender equality remains 'humanity's biggest project,' declares UN official

16 March - Twenty years ago in Beijing, countries signed on to a comprehensive global blueprint for gender equality and women’s empowerment, and achieving that goal remains “humanity’s biggest project,” according to senior United Nations official Lakshmi Puri.

In the following interview, Ms. Puri, the Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, discusses why 2015 is a critical year for the gender equality agenda and what it will take to achieve what her agency has dubbed “Planet 50-50” by 2030.

Ms. Puri spoke with the UN News Centre as thousands of participants gathered in New York for the annual session on the Commission on the Status of Women, the celebration of International Women’s Day (8 March) and the commemoration of ‘Beijing+20’. The interview has been edited for content and clarity.

UN News Centre: Is International Women’s Day one of the most important days for UN Women?

Lakshmi Puri: Indeed. It’s an important signalling for the world that the women’s agenda is critical. But also it’s a signalling that gender equality and women’s empowerment is humanity’s biggest project in this century. So, it’s the marking of a day but it’s also the marking of every day of the year. Because we cannot just commemorate it, celebrate it, take actions to show that we’re actually doing something about gender equality and women’s empowerment on one day. In order to bring about change and transformation, we need to do it every day of the week, every hour of the day and every second of the hour. Without that, we are not going to have change.

The progress has been far too slow… it’s going to take nearly a century, 81 years, to get gender parity. So we cannot wait another century. If we want to achieve something really transformative on gender equality and women’s rights, every day must be International Women’s Day.

UN News Centre: What will be the biggest change for the gender equality agenda in 2015?

Lakshmi Puri: The biggest change I hope to see is that the international community, when it adopts the first ever universal sustainable development agenda, that it also adopts a sustainable development goal on achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment for all women and girls. And when it adopts the gender targets in other goals, that this will become a very strong driver of the transformation that we seek. And, also for the first time, because of Beijing+20, we are going to see an acceleration of the implementation of the strategic objectives and actions that had been set out in the Beijing Platform for Action. So, we are going to see that conjunction and that will be transformative, we hope.

Another conjunction is, of course, the disaster risk reduction conference in Sendai, Japan. We are working to see that gender equality and women’s empowerment is fully integrated and prioritized; that it is supported with the kind of focus on the impact of disasters, which is always disproportionate on women and on girls. But, also, which seeks to tap the potential of women, and their special capacity in disaster risk reduction and resilience building. And then, of course, the climate change summit. In that context, UN Women is working with Member States to make sure that the agreement that is reached fully reflects gender equality and women’s empowerment in terms of the principles, in mitigation, in adaptation, and in terms of the means of achieving the goals that have been set.

UN News Centre: What are the most concrete actions that men can take to support women’s rights?

Lakshmi Puri: I think the message that this campaign gives is that gender equality and women’s empowerment is not just a women’s issue or project. It is as much the project and responsibility of men and boys. And it is a responsibility to make sure that they show that they respect women and girls and their human rights. That they not only refrain from violence against women and girls but that they take action to protect women from violence, such as in the prosecution of perpetrators...
of violence, and also be in engaged in the provision of multi-sectoral services to women and survivors of violence.

There are so many different ways in which men can make a difference – in their personal relationships, in their professional contexts, in their social contexts, how they behave in society and in community. And it is also very important that we engender the political space. That’s why the ‘HeForShe’ campaign is very much targeting heads of State, parliamentarians everywhere and we’ve launched the ‘10x10x10’ initiative which means that we are seeking going beyond clicking the button or putting on pins. We are asking some of these ‘leaders of leaders’ – ten heads of State and government, ten CEOs, and ten presidents of universities – to take a vow of being the champion of HeForShe, which involves some extra responsibilities through their own actions but also mobilizing society, mobilizing countries, and the international community around the goal of gender equality and women’s empowerment. It has been a very powerful and game-changing campaign.

**UN News Centre: What is this year’s focus for CSW?**

**Lakshmi Puri:** This year’s focus is the Beijing+20 review of implementation of the Platform for Action. This is the bedrock of what the world needs to do to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. It identifies strategic objectives and actions under 12 critical areas: women and poverty, women and health, women and the environment, ending violence against women, women and the economy, women and the media, women in conflict and post-conflict situations. So what the world is doing this year is undertaking a systematic review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform in these 12 critical but interrelated areas.

The national reviews have been completed and we have a record number of 168 countries presenting their reports on how they have or have not implemented, what are the gaps and challenges, what has been the progress, what has been the scale of efforts.

**UN News Centre: What was your experience like growing up in India?**

**Lakshmi Puri:** I grew up in post-independent India, which was very much influenced by a generation which had just undergone a protracted freedom struggle and a freedom struggle that had embraced gender equality and women’s empowerment. Mahatma Gandhi was a strong supporter of that while [Jawaharlal] Nehru was also a strong supporter of women’s rights. I also grew up in a feminist home. My parents had broken quite a few glass ceilings in terms of both their education: my mother was one of the first post-graduates in her state and also they had had an eight-year courtship before they decided to get married at 24. Whereas her mother had been married at the age of 12. So it was a tremendous leap that she had made and so she was very fired up as a woman who would want to see her three daughters being women of achievement and being someone in their own right. So I was given the full opportunity in terms of education and then I joined the Indian diplomatic service and it has been very empowering to be in that service, very accommodative of women, very respectful. I’ve not had any occasion in my career to complain about discrimination.

Professionally, my own trajectory has been very positive and my own experience has been very positive, but of course India as a whole has also progressed since our independence. And today we have the two biggest challenges that women face despite all the progress and that compound gender inequality and women’s disempowerment and violence against women: poverty and the baggage of cultural and social norms that are against the principles of equality and empowerment. I think we have a long way to go but as recent cases of violence against women showed, the whole country is completely rising up […]

There was an amazing outpouring of empathy for the victim [woman gang raped on a bus in December 2012] and for the tragedy that took place but also an outrage that had never been seen before. It also stirred the conscience of the nation. It was amazing to see how men, and young men, came out in protest of this unspeakable, brutal and heinous crime. […] There are a lot of HeForShes in India, including those who came out wearing skirts saying that women don’t deserve to be raped. That was a very strong solidarity movement but also evoked a social movement, also a political movement. It became an election issue. It was in everybody’s manifesto: how to deal with violence against women.

But also what came out very strongly was that violence against women is just the symptom of gender inequality and high levels of gender inequality and discrimination which, somehow, Indian society had thought we had overcome, that we were much more gender equal society with increased education, with so-called modernization of the economy, and the polity. This was a wake-up call.
In Nigeria, UN political chief delivers message of solidarity ahead of elections

16 March - The top United Nations political official arrived in Nigeria today for a two-day visit aimed at conveying the world body’s support and solidarity with the country ahead of the general elections starting on 28 March.

Initially set to take place on 14 February, national elections in Nigeria were postponed owing to security concerns.

“In meetings, Mr. Feltman will underscore the Secretary-General’s message on the importance of holding the elections in accordance with the new electoral calendar issued by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC),” UN spokesperson Farhan Haq told a news conference in New York.

“He will encourage all relevant national institutions to work with the Electoral Commission to ensure that all eligible Nigerians can exercise their constitutional right to freely vote on the new dates set.”

In addition, Mr. Feltman reiterate the need for all Nigerians to work together to create an environment that is conducive for the holding of credible and peaceful elections, the spokesperson noted.

Mr. Feltman, who is accompanied by the Secretary-General’s High-Level Representative to Nigeria, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, will also discuss the situation in the north-east of Nigeria resulting from continuing indiscriminate and brutal attacks by Boko Haram against civilian populations.

Countries urged to make dementia public health priority as UN conference opens in Geneva

16 March - The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) today opened the first ever Ministerial Conference on Global Action Against Dementia by reminding health ministers from around the world, experts and civil society representatives that every four seconds someone is diagnosed with the incurable disease.

“The aim of the conference is to raise awareness of the socio-economic burden created by dementia, and to highlight that this burden can be reduced if the world collectively commits to placing dementia high on the global public health agenda,” WHO said in its announcement of the two-day conference that is being held at its headquarters in Geneva.

The first day of the conference tackled problems ranging from research to care and human rights posed by dementia, which affects some 47 million worldwide, a number that is expected to nearly triple by 2050.

The UN independent expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, Rosa Kornfeld-Matte, in a special intervention on the human rights aspects of the disease, said persons with dementia must have their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy respected at all stages of the disease. She urged governments worldwide to effectively integrate a human rights-based approach to their global action against dementia.

“Persons with dementia, including older persons with this disease, should be able to enjoy their rights and freedoms in any circumstances,” said Ms. Kornfeld-Matte, whose mandate comes directly from the UN Human Rights Council.

“I call on all States and other stakeholders to effectively adopt a human rights-based approach when addressing dementia,” she said.

WHO risk communications expert Gaya Gamhewage, who moderated one of five panels today, asked the audience to count
to four.

“One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four,” Dr. Gamhewage counted out loud and said in that amount of time, “Another person was diagnosed with dementia.”

According to WHO, dementia is “a syndrome that affects memory, thinking, behaviour and ability to perform everyday activities – usually of a chronic or progressive nature. Dementia is overwhelming not only for the people who have it, but also for their caregivers and families. There is a lack of awareness and understanding of dementia in most countries, resulting in stigmatization and barriers to diagnosis and care.”

Dementia is caused by a variety of diseases and injuries that primarily or secondarily affect the brain, such as Alzheimer's disease or stroke, and there is no treatment currently available to cure dementia or to alter its progressive course.

Two people living with dementia, Hilary Doxford, who did not get a diagnosis for seven years, and Michael Ellenbogen, who had already lost his job by the time he received his diagnosis, appealed to governments about the need for earlier and correct diagnoses.

Ms. Doxford and Mr. Ellenbogen were joined by Sona Bari, who was a caregiver for her mother who has dementia, in raising the urgent need for governments to think long term and make dementia a public health priority.

Tomorrow, the conference will focus on how “to collectively move the global dementia agenda forward.”

**UN announces members of panel probing new information on Dag Hammarskjöld death**

*16 March* - The United Nations today announced the members of the Independent Panel of Experts tasked with examining new information related to the tragic death of former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and his party in September 1961.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed Mohamed Chande Othman, the Chief Justice of Tanzania, to head the Panel. The other two members are Kerryn Macaulay, Australia’s Representative on the Council of the UN International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and Henrik Larsen, a ballistics expert at the National Center of Forensic Services in the Danish National Police.

The Panel, which will begin its work on 30 March 2015, will examine and assess the “probative value” of new information related to the death of Mr. Hammarskjöld and the members of the party accompanying him on an aircraft that crashed in what is today Zambia on the night of 17-18 September 1961.

Established by a General Assembly resolution adopted in December 2014, the Panel is expected to submit its report to the Secretary-General no later than 30 June 2015.

The Assembly, in its resolution, had also encouraged Member States to release any relevant records in their possession and to provide to the Secretary-General relevant information related to Mr. Hammarskjöld’s death.
Pakistan: UN chief deplores terrorist attack on Christian sites of worship

16 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned “in the strongest possible terms” the terrorist attacks committed against two Christian churches in Pakistan.

The suicide bombings, perpetrated by the Pakistani Taliban on 15 March, targeted the Christian community in the city of Lahore and left at least 14 people dead and scores injured, according to media reports.

The Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehrik-i-Taliban, have intensified their attacks against civilian targets in recent months. Last December, an attack against a school in Peshawar resulted in the deaths of at least 130 people, the vast majority of whom were children, drawing universal condemnation from senior UN officials who described the attack as “blood-curdling” and a form of “savage extremism.”

In a statement issued today by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson, the Secretary-General noted with “grave concern” the Pakistani Taliban’s claim of responsibility for yesterday’s bombings and its threats to carry out more attacks in the future.

“He calls on the Government of Pakistan to swiftly bring the perpetrators to justice and to do its utmost to prevent attacks against places of worship and protect religious minorities,” the statement continued.

“The Secretary-General extends his heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims and to the Government and people of Pakistan.”

UN relief agencies ramp up support to cyclone-hit Vanuatu as country’s President appeals for assistance

15 March - Amid reports that powerful Cyclone Pam has impacted at least half the population of Vanuatu, the country’s President, attending a United Nations conference under way in Japan aiming to reduce disaster risk, appealed for international support in anticipation of large-scale needs.

"Vanuatu is used to disasters but the indications are that Cyclone Pam has caused unprecedented damages, said President Baldwin Lonsdale in a press release issued on his behalf by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR).

The leader of the island nation noted that following a direct hit from the Category 5 storm on Friday, at least two deaths have been confirmed and over 30 injured people are being treated in the Central Hospital in the capital, Port Vila where many people are now homeless and torrential rain has led to severe flooding. He also said bridges which link the capital with the rest of the island have been destroyed.

Mr. Lonsdale made his appeal from Sendai, Japan, where he has been attending since Sunday the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. The Conference has drawn thousands of Government and civil society delegations to craft a new framework for managing disaster risk which will reduce mortality and curb economic losses.

In opening remarks to the Conference over the weekend, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that while the impact and scope of the disaster in Vanuatu is not yet clear, he feared the damage and destruction could be widespread.

Mr. Lonsdale reported through UNISDR that Vanuatu's National Disaster Management Office is coordinating an aerial survey today of the affected areas the Government would then have a better idea of what has happened in the outlying
islands.

“We are particularly concerned about the province of Tafea. However, I can say from past experience that there will be severe damage to schools, health facilities, roads and public utilities,” he said, adding that there will also be significant humanitarian needs as large numbers of people have lost their homes in the capital Port Vila.

“This is a major calamity for our country. Every year we lose 6 per cent our GDP (gross domestic product) to disasters. Calling the cyclone “a huge setback” for the country's development, Mr. Lonsdale added that it would also have severe impacts for all sectors of economic activity including tourism, agriculture and manufacturing.

The country is already threatened by coastal erosion and rising sea levels in addition to five active volcanoes and earthquakes. “This is why I am attending this Conference and why Vanuatu wants to see a strong new framework on disaster risk reduction which will support us in tackling the drivers of disaster risk such as climate change.”

Meanwhile, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that perhaps half the population of Vanuatu, It is estimated that at least half the population of Vanuatu has been affected by cyclone Pam. Of these, at least 54,000 are children.

Many homes in Vanuatu have likely been destroyed as they are built with natural and local materials such as thatched and corrugated roofs that are vulnerable to strong winds and floods.

UNICEF also reports that schools, churches and community halls are being used as emergency shelters. Many of these buildings are likely to have suffered structural damage. Lifeline facilities like hospitals, electrical utilities, water supply and telephone systems are most likely severely damaged.

Other Pacific Island countries have been severely impact as well, including the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati.

In Vanuatu, health centres have likely sustained severe damage and will need rebuilding and restocking with medical and nutrition supplies. Plans are under way to support the Government to do a major measles immunization campaign, given recent cases.

Schools are being used as evacuation centres, and UNICEF will be supporting children's education, including providing school in a box kits. Child friendly spaces will be set up in evacuation centres to provide children with psycho-social assistance.

UNICEF's immediate needs to assist the affected countries is at least $2 million, initially covering support to water, sanitation, hygiene, health, education, nutrition and protection services, and including support for the high costs of logistics across this vast geographic area.

Just yesterday, Sune Gudnitz, Head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Regional Office for the Pacific said Vanuatu had accepted OCHA's offer to deploy staff to support the coordination of the response.

A UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team was expected arrive in Port Vila late yesterday. OCHA was also expected to deploy three staff with information management, public information and humanitarian coordination as well.
Ban praises Sendai recovery as model for turning tragedy of disaster into sustainable future

15 March - Integrating disaster risk reduction into development can save lives and livelihoods, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said as he toured Sendai, Japan, which was devastated four years ago by an earthquake and tsunami but which today, following an impressive rebuilding effort, is a reminder to the world that “we must turn all of the painful lessons of disasters into new policies for a better future.”

“Resilient recovery means protecting societies against the worst damage from future disasters. The money spent is not a cost – it is a valuable investment,” said Mr. Ban in remarks at a Tohoku University symposium, Lessons Learned from the Great East Japan Earthquake.

The UN chief is in the northern Japanese city attending the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, which opened yesterday and wraps up on Wednesday, 18 March. The meeting has drawn some 4,000 Government and civil society participants aiming to agree a new framework for managing disaster risk which will reduce mortality and curb economic losses.

Calling for a comprehensive approach that puts people first – especially the elderly, children, women, persons with disabilities, and others who are vulnerable, the Secretary-General said: “Success at the Sendai conference on disaster risk reduction will get this historic year off to the best possible start.”

Indeed, he said the United Nations sees 2015 as “a seminal year,” when the world body will aim to tackle twin priorities. One is crafting a post-2015 development agenda that would succeed the landmark Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). “We are now shaping the sustainable development agenda with a set of sustainable development goals.”

“Second, we have to agree on and adopt a universal, very meaningful, very strong, ambitious climate change agreement by December this year,” said the Secretary-General, explaining that crafting successful, effective and efficient disaster reduction mechanisms will help these twin priorities succeed.

“Therefore I am saying that sustainability, for which we are working very hard, starts in Sendai,” he declared, pointing out that allocating $6 billion for disaster risk reduction each year could bring up to $360 billion in savings by 2030. “If we invest one dollar today, then we can gain seven dollars by preparing against natural disasters.”

Mr. Ban carried that message, spotlighting the need to ensure 2015 is a year of transformative action towards sustainable development for all, throughout his visits today to some areas of Sendai impacted by the 2011 quake to view reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, including the Minami-Gamo purification facility crippled by the 2001 earthquake and tsunami.

He also visited the Minami-Gamo Community Center and met community leaders and students and citizens, where he noted that four years ago, he had visited Minami High School [in Fukushima] and met many students at that time and had been very much inspired by their strong will to overcome and spirit and courage. “I am deeply impressed by the way the Japanese people have turned a tragedy into building back better their community,” said the Secretary-General.

“The United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction…now being held in Sendai is exactly a demonstration of such spirit and visionary leadership of the Japanese Government and people to turn the tragedy into a better future, a sustainable future,” he declared, adding: “The world and the United Nations support you. Keep doing your best.”

In his meetings today, Mr. Ban met with General Prayuth Chan-ocha, Prime Minister of Thailand, as well as with Fumio Kishida, Foreign Minister of Japan, and with King Mswati III of Swaziland.
‘Health at very center of disaster risk reduction,’ say UN agency officials in Sendai

15 March - The Ebola outbreak in West Africa, powerful storms in the Asia-Pacific region and ongoing conflicts in Syria and elsewhere are all stark reminders that health and stronger health system capacities must be central to the new framework for managing disaster risk currently being discussed in Sendai, Japan, senior United Nations health agency officials emphasized today.

“If we're going to come out of emergencies in good shape, we're going to have to go into them with healthier, more resilient populations,” said Dr. Bruce Aylward, Assistant Director General for Emergencies at the UN World Health Organization (WHO), briefing reporters in Sendai at the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Noting that the aim of the current conference, which opened yesterday and wraps up Wednesday 18 March, is to agree a new set of measures for managing disaster risk to reduce mortality and curb economic losses and which will succeed the landmark 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), Dr. Aylward said thus far, health appears to be featuring very prominently in the current negotiations.

“This framework is very different from what we saw in Hyogo because its not just about protecting people's health but the recognition that health is at the very centre of disaster risk reduction, he said, alongside Ciro Ugarte, Director, Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief at WHO's Regional Office for the Americas, Alex Ross, Director of WHO's Kobe Centre, and Remi Sogunro, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) Officer-in-Charge in Liberia.

“Health and disaster risk reduction are deeply connected; healthy people are resilient people and resilient people recover more quickly from disasters,” continued Dr. Aylward, who is also Special Representative to the WHO Director General on Elba, stressing that while the HFA had included only three references to health, the current framework contained some 30 mentions and spoke specifically to risks associated with epidemics and pandemics.

West Africa's current Ebola crisis, along with Typhoon Haiyan, which wreaked havoc in the Philippine archipelago in 2013, and ongoing conflict in countries such as Syria and the Central African Republic have all made it plainly clear that health must be a central concern.

He said that WHO is uniquely placed within the UN system to ensure the new framework deals effectively with health matters. In Sendai, the agency will spotlighting several key initiatives, including: a policy framework WHO and its regional partners had put together to help them take the post-2015 framework and translate it into concrete actions for ministries of health; and efforts to ensure multi-hazard early warning measures and capacities are bolstered to be able to detect, report and respond to disease outbreaks and pandemics quickly and more effectively.

The agency has also fast-tracked its 'hospital safety index' to be ready for launch in Sendai. This tool, explained Dr. Aylward, lays out 151 specific indicators for governments and health ministries. It provides a snapshot of the probability that a hospital or health facility will continue to function in emergency situations, based on structural, nonstructural and functional factors, including the environment and the health services network to which it belongs.

Here, he noted that when Typhoon Ruby struck the Philippines last year, no medical facilities had been lost, largely because of lessons learned and measures put in place after Haiyan, which had destroyed some 600 health facilities.

“But this is about more than buildings,” Dr. Aylward said, stressing that managing disaster risk also includes ensuring entire health systems can function properly and effectively in the wake of crisis, outbreaks or pandemics.

Echoing this, Mr. Ugarte said the WHO index and similar measures aimed to address the real fact that in many cases, hospitals are lost exactly when critical services are needed. “We have to move from theory to practice,” he continued, adding that efforts should be made, as had been the case in Japan in the wake of multiple natural disasters, to focus on the facilities that will have to remain operational “no matter what.”
Indeed, the experts stressed, resilient health systems can reduce underlying vulnerability, protect health facilities and services, and scale-up the response to meet the wide-ranging health needs in disasters.

UN responding to ‘devastating’ impact of Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu, Pacific region

14 March - The United Nations announced today that it is taking all necessary steps to respond to the catastrophic impacts of a devastating tropical cyclone that affected most of Vanuatu over the past two days.

“A disaster of this magnitude has not been experienced by Vanuatu in recent history – particularly in terms of the reach of the potential damage and the ferocity of the storm,” said Sune Gudnitz, Head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Regional Office for the Pacific in a statement to the press.

Tropical Cyclone Pam slammed into Vanuatu's capital Port Vila, on Efate island, as an extremely destructive Category 5 cyclone yesterday evening. Winds are estimated to have reached 250kmph with gusts peaking at around 320kmph, causing damage to infrastructure, impacting services such as electricity and leaving debris strewn across the capital.

“While we have no official reports of the damage the cyclone caused, the Pacific Humanitarian Team is ready to support a government-led response to a worst-case scenario,” Ms. Sune added.

The Vanuatu Government has not yet issued a formal request for international assistance. It has, however, accepted OCHA's offer to deploy staff to support the coordination of the response. A UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team is expected arrive in Port Vila tomorrow evening. OCHA will also deploy three staff with information management, public information and humanitarian coordination expertise tomorrow as well.

Other humanitarian partners, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are also supporting critical areas such as shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, and protection.

The Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) coordinates expert human and resources regionally and globally should the impacts of a disaster exceed a government’s capacity to respond.

Failure to end crisis in Syria ‘diminishes us all’ – UN refugees envoy Angelina Jolie

14 March - As the Syrian conflict enters its fifth year, it is shameful that even the basic demand for full humanitarian access has not been met, Oscar-winning actress and United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) Special Envoy, Angelina Jolie said today.

"It is deeply alarming that the international response so clearly falls short of what is needed to end the conflict in Syria,” Ms. Jolie emphasised in a statement.

According to the UN, over 220,000 Syrians have been killed, and almost half of the country's men, women and children have been forced to flee their homes since the conflict in Syria erupted in March 2011. More than 4 million people have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, while a further 7.6 million are displaced within Syria.

UNHCR says that most of the over 4 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries see no prospect of returning home in the near future, and have scant opportunity to restart their lives in exile as many of them live in insecure dwellings and in poverty.
“It is sickening that crimes are being committed against the Syrian people on a daily basis with impunity. The failure to end this crisis diminishes all of us,” Ms. Jolie said, urging governments around the world to put aside their differences and try again to solve the conflict politically.

“People are entitled to feel bewildered and angry that the UN Security Council seems unable to respond to the worst crisis of the 21st century,” she added, noting that neighbouring countries and international humanitarian agencies are being stretched beyond their limits.

She also appealed for urgent steps to demonstrate that the international community is serious about accountability in Syria: “to show that we will not turn a blind eye to war crimes and that we will not fail refugees, the displaced, and the survivors.”

**Sendai: Critical role of women in building disaster resilience focus of event at UN conference**

14March - Spotlighting the positive actions of women in planning and decision-making to make their communities safer before, during and after disasters strike, senior United Nations, Government and civil society representatives today emphasized that risk reduction efforts can never be fully effective or sustainable if the needs and voices of women are ignored.

Among the dozens of events that kicked off the opening in Sendai, Japan, of the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, a key multi-stakeholder dialogue heard participants urge greater efforts to expand and strengthen opportunities, and make full use of the leadership of women in disaster risk reduction.

When disasters strike, women are most heavily impacted but often overcome immense obstacles to lead response efforts and provide care and support, even at risk of their own health and well-being, the heads of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), told the first of the Conference’s intergovernmental high-level partnership dialogues, on “Mobilizing Women’s Leadership in Disaster Risk Reduction.”

The aim of the Conference, which wraps up Wednesday, 18 March, is to update the landmark Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), agreed decade ago and named after the Japanese city in which it was negotiated and which details the work required from all sectors and actors to reduce disaster losses.

According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), while progress has been made in the implementation of the HFA, it is widely recognized that serious gaps and challenges remain in delivering on the international community’s commitments to gender equality and women's rights in disaster risk reduction efforts. Engagement and leadership of women as change agents in their societies are still often overlooked in disaster risk management, where women are often categorized as a vulnerable group.

WFP Executive Director Ertharin Cousin underscored that the “global reset” beginning today in Sendai – the first of a crucial series of UN-backed conferences and meetings set for 2015 respectively on development financing, sustainable development and climate change, all aimed at ensuring a safer and more prosperous world for all – must include steps to place women at the centre of disaster risk reduction efforts.

Without those steps, none of the ambitious goals proposed this year would be met. Questioning why there had been more “grey suits” in the room of the main hall when the Third World Conference had opened earlier today “than there are when we are here talking about women,” she said disasters indeed exacerbated pre-existing barriers and inequalities that women faced, putting them at greater risk of injury and death.

As such, “women must be sitting in the lead chairs during these discussions; they must be part of the decision-making; they must be part of this conversation,” Ms. Cousin said, stressing that it is time cast aside the restrictive view of women as vulnerable and merely accepting aid. Indeed, women must be recognized for who they are and the roles they undertake.
which are central pillars of disaster response and recovery.

“We must recognize and mobilize women going forward…it is time to move from aspiration to implementation,” she said calling for efforts to ensure commitments made in the landmark Beijing Platform for Action, which is this year marking its 20th anniversary, as well as the Hyogo Framework.

For his part, UNFPA Executive Director Babatunde Osotimehin said the Sendai Conference offers a new opportunity for the world to galvanize around a common disaster risk reduction agenda and commit to collective actions that put women at its centre.

The fact that serious gaps remain in the area is not for lack of guidance and tools on relevant gender-based approaches and best practices. What is needed is requisite political will to make ensure that women's voices were enhanced and participation ensured. All such efforts must bolster women's rights, included sexual and reproductive health rights, he said.

Continuing, he suggested key actions that could be taken at all levels, stressing that dedicated resources are lacking and as such, money must be devoted to disaster risk reduction and women must be empowered to play a real role in that area. Mr. Osotimehin also said sustained and sustainable disaster risk reduction requires an accountability framework with indicators and targets to measure progress and ensure that national and local actors move towards implementation.

In a keynote address, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said his country had endured many disasters and such harsh experiences had Japan keenly aware that the power of women is essential for risk reduction as well as reconstruction in the wake of such events.

He said that Japan had long understood the importance of enhancing the voice, visibility and participation of women. For example, he said that if a disaster struck during the middle of the day, most of the people at home would be women so their perspective is essential “absolutely essential for restoring devastated.”

“No matter how much the ground shakes, we will remain calm in our hearts,” said Prime Minister Abe, quoting the powerful words of women in one of the districts he had visited in the wake of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, and pledging Japan's ongoing strong commitment to ensuring all women played a greater role in disaster risk reduction.

The panel was co-Chaired by Sanae Takaichi, Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan and Loren Legarda, Senator from the Philippines.

Panellists included Tarja Halonen, Former President of Finland, Emiko Okuyama, Mayor of Sendai city, Kristalina Georgieva, Vice-President of the European Commission for Budget and Human Resources, and Adi Vasulevu Merewalasi of FemLINKPACIFIC.
In Japan, UN chief urges global solidarity to strengthen disaster resilience, boost development

14 March - With global leaders gathered in Sendai, Japan, to agree a new framework for managing disaster risk which will reduce mortality and curb economic losses, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today declared that responding to the world's growing needs requires empowering individuals, supporting communities and backing promises with resources.

“True resilience comes from strong bonds among countries and communities. The UN is committed to strengthening these bonds with a unified Plan of Action,” said Mr. Ban in opening remarks to the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction.

He recalled that the meeting, which is expected to draw thousands of government and civil society participants, is opening just days after the solemn fourth anniversary of the devastating earthquake that struck the Sendai region, and as a powerful cyclone is bearing down on the tiny island nation of Vanuatu and its neighbors in the Pacific.

The aim of the Conference, which wraps up Wednesday, 18 March, is to update the landmark agreement reached a decade ago in Hyogo, Japan, which detailed the work required from all different sectors and actors to reduce disaster losses.

The Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), itself crafted in the wake of the devastation of the Indian Ocean tsunami in January 2005, which claimed 227,000 lives, has since produced some important successes, including the reduction in the number of people directly affected by natural disasters in Asia – where most such disasters occur – by almost one billion.

“What we are discussing here is very real for millions around the world. We must keep their needs in sharp focus during the negotiations on this agreement,” said the Secretary-General, who noted that overnight, the eye of topical cyclone Pam had passed very close to Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila.

“We are not yet clear on the impact, but we fear the destruction and damage could be widespread. I hope there will be minimal loss of life. I extend my condolences to the people of Vanuatu and their representatives,” said the UN chief, adding: “Our thoughts are with all disaster victims. Our best possible tribute will be to make this Conference a success.”

Indeed, Mr. Ban told the gathered delegations that they had made this the highest-level meeting on disaster risk reduction in history. “This is the first stop on our journey to a new future…To put the people of this world on a sustainable path. Disaster risk reduction advances progress on sustainable development and climate change.”

Emphasizing that an ambitious outcome in Sendai would put the international community on a path to a new sustainable development agenda with new global goals at its core, including a universal climate agreement and financing to turn plans into results, the Secretary-General noted that Sendai kicks off a particularly crucial year for the United Nations, with world leaders meet in Addis Ababa in July to discuss development financing, then again in New York in September to adopt a new development agenda, and finally in Paris in December to forge a meaningful, binding climate change agreement.

“Sustainability starts in Sendai!” declared the UN chief, stressing that building on the successes of the Hyogo Framework, “we must respond to the world's growing needs by empowering individuals, supporting communities and backing promises with resources. We must especially help the poorest and most vulnerable.”

He went on to note that climate change is intensifying the risks for hundreds of millions of people particularly in small island developing States and coastal areas. Disasters put persons with disabilities and older persons in grave danger. In addition, nine out of 10 disaster fatalities are in low- and middle-income countries.

“Those States need special attention. But disaster risk reduction is in everybody's interest – and it is everybody's business. In this globalized economy, our world is smaller than ever. An earthquake in one country shakes up financial markets in another. Tropical storms in one region cause economic turbulence in another.”
“Disaster risk reduction is a frontline defence against the impacts of climate change. It is a smart investment for business and a wise investment in saving lives,” said the Secretary-General, explaining that the global annual price tag in damage now exceeds $300 billion.

“We can watch that number grow as more people suffer. Or we can dramatically lower that figure and invest the savings in development. Six billion dollars allocated each year can result in savings of up to $360 billion by 2030, he explained.

Yet he also stressed that resilience is not just a matter of strong buildings that can withstand earthquakes. “True resilience comes from strong bonds among countries and communities. The UN is committed to strengthening these bonds with a unified Plan of Action. Let us act in a spirit of global solidarity to make our world safer and more prosperous for all.”

Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of the host country, recalling the magnitude of the quake that had struck the Tokohu region, where Sendai is located, with 20,000 lives lost and much loss of livelihood, said that because his country was disaster prone it had been working hard on disaster risk reduction.

Japan, he said, emphasized the importance of “Build Back Better”, constantly revising flood management plans, enforcing weirs, constructing channels and conducting disaster education. The efforts were paying off – 60 years ago, large-scale flooding often cost thousands of lives, now it was rare for a flood to take more than 100 lives. Even during the East Japan quake, students knew to evacuate to higher ground through longtime oral tradition. It was now crucial to learn from recent events as well.

During the Third World Conference, current and past experiences from every part of the globe would be shared, participants would examine activities built on the Hyogo Framework, discuss utilization of new technology, seek effective collaboration with various stakeholders and then establish a new framework, passing from the era of Hyogo to Sendai, he said, welcoming the enthusiastic efforts of all participants in that work.

In his meetings in the margins of the Conference, the Secretary-General met with Prime Minister Abe and the two conferred, among others, on countering violent extremism and addressing the threat posed by Daesh, with Mr. Ban using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The Secretary-General to that end expressed his condolences to the Japanese Government and people for the horrendous killings of Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa by Daesh. The Secretary-General and the Prime Minister also discussed Syria, including the upcoming donor conference in Kuwait, as well as Middle East peace and UN reform.

Mr. Ban also met with Baldwin Lonsdale, President of Vanuatu. The UN chief said that his thoughts are with the people of Vanuatu as it faces the impacts of tropical cyclone Pam. He added that Vanuatu has already been suffering from the adverse effects of climate change, and storms such as Pam only exacerbate the challenges that the country faces.

The Secretary-General noted that Vanuatu's situation further highlighted the importance of the Sendai conference, as well as the urgent need for ambitious action on both disaster risk reduction and on climate change.
FEATURE: ‘Rebuilding Sichuan’ takes top film prize at UN event on disaster resilience

16 March - A film chronicling the monumental effort of the engineers and designers to rebuild entire new cities from scratch following the devastating 2008 earthquake in China's Sichuan Province, took the top prize at the first United Nations co-organized International Awards for the Best TV Documentaries on Disaster Risk Reduction.

During a special ceremony at the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, the documentary *Rebuilding Sichuan* received the inaugural award, besting competition that included films on topics that ranged from floods in Pakistan and Great Britain to the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck the communities in Japan's northeast region in 2011.

Producer Sen Zhang collected the award for the film, broadcast on Discovery Channel. In one scene, a resolute official is featured pledging “the earthquake resistance of the buildings must be strengthened” before a huge redevelopment model.

“I knew there are three nominated films. I admire them, but hoped we would eventually win the award. I was confident and full of expectation. We finally won. I am excited, very excited,” Mr. Zhang told UN Radio after receiving the honour.

The awards aim to honor those filmmakers, producers and broadcasters that are working to make documentaries that can help to protect vulnerable communities from the risks posed by future disasters.

This has been a recurring theme at the Conference, which has been running in Sendai, Japan, since Saturday and wraps up Wednesday 18 March, with delegations expected to adopt a new international framework for managing disaster risk which will reduce mortality and curb economic losses.

The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), together with its partners, the Asia Broadcasting Union (ABU) and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) chose the winners from among nearly 100 films that have been broadcast on television since 2005.

Natalia Ilieva, from the ABU, said UNISDR should be congratulated for initiating this first international competition for documentaries on reducing disaster risks. “Among all the nominated films there is a great wealth of stories…Hopefully these new awards will inspire even more producers to tell these difficult stories so we can try to make disaster risk reduction education a part of everyday programming,” she added.

Ms Leoni said: “The selection process was very difficult. We received many excellent documentaries. Making a film about such a serious issue like disaster risk is not easy and requires a mix of technical skill and compassion to tell these stories in a compelling way.”

*The Kamaishi Miracle*, by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), won the Best Human Story Category. It recounted how 184 students from a school survived the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Senior Producer Ms Kazuyo Fukuda said: “It is a great privilege to be here and to share this great honour with the students and teachers of the school.”

*It's Time* by GMA Network Philippines won Best Investigative Story. The film profiles the frenetic pace of modern life and asks 'could nature itself be up against a deadline' to highlight the over-consumption of the planet's natural resources.<P.

Executive Producer Richelle Figueroa said: “These awards should set the agenda and highlight the importance of disaster risk reduction for vulnerable countries around the world such as the Philippines.”
*Vets in the Disaster Zone* by Dragonfly Film and Television Productions won the Most Innovative Documentary category. In one scene from the film, Philippines farmers corral pigs – using plastic sheeting in an innovative technique which moves the animals' pen along with them, keeping them calm and stress-free – as the narrator intones: “Moving animals quickly and calmly in a disaster is vital if you want them to survive.”

World Animal Protection was a partner in the film. Director of Disaster Management James Sawyer picked up the award. “The people and animals of the Philippines showed great resilience to come back after the disaster. It shows that resilience really is a state of mind,” he said.

Host of the ceremony, international broadcaster Veronica Pedrosa, said: “This year’s awards reveal a truly global picture of disaster reduction efforts – from flooding in Pakistan and Great Britain to the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck the communities in Japan in 2011.”