

Opening Ceremony 10.am-12.30

Remarks by Mr. Martti Ahtisaari
Former President of Finland

As we discuss the issue of preventing man made disasters and natural disasters, it is natural for me to focus on the first part – the man made disasters – because that is where my own personal experience is from. In the course of the years I have been engaged in trouble shooting in Africa and Asia. Europeans, too, are perfectly able of generating manmade disasters even in our own time and some of my experience comes from Europe.

It is difficult to think of a more timely topic for our conference than the one we have before us. Almost every newscast from various corners of the world proves that the international community is inadequately prepared to face various kinds of both man made and natural catastrophes. This is certainly true in the case of developing countries but not only in them. Some of the wealthiest and most advanced countries in the world confront formidable challenges when trying to cope with, in particular, natural catastrophes.

As I have been thinking about what could be done so that the international community and the various governmental and civil society actors could do a better job two things come to mind. One is obvious. All the good will in the world is not enough to bring order or an optimal utilisation of available resources in a situation where the international response to a crisis situation is massive. Without strategic thinking and advance planning, without previously agreed and well rehearsed systems for cooperation, without adequately trained staff, whether in public or private service, good results cannot be achieved. What we obviously need is much better concerted action so that the various participants in the mitigation of a crisis situation could give their best.

This can only be achieved if the various potential actors increase the exchange of information about the resources, their capacity, their management and planning and – last but certainly not least – about the training they give to their staff. We have often seen in conflicts situations that the military are much better prepared to act in an orderly and efficient manner than many of the civilian actors. Fortunately some military organisations have also be trained in performing ordinary civilian tasks. That improves their acceptability and their credibility as they can, through very useful services, show that they are present to help, not to impose their will on others.

Everything cannot be done through governmental agencies, whether national or international. The civil society has demonstrated time and again that it can give an invaluable contribution even in extremely difficult circumstances. What

the governments could do, without interfering in the activities of the voluntary organisations in any improper way, is to provide opportunities for joint training of staff to work in exceptionally challenging environments. Through well planned and efficiently done training not only is the productivity of the staff increased but also their skills in working safely under duress is improved. In too many operations one of the greatest impediments to good results has been the fact that those coming to rescue become themselves victims of the situation.

Coordinated operations, making full use of available resources can only be achieved if there are adequately resources for managing such operations. One critical factor is the ability of the various actors to communicate with one another in an efficient and a secure way. It is for this purpose a project has been launched by Crisis Management Initiative, an NGO I have the pleasure to chair, to develop communication systems that can be made instantly available in a crisis situation giving access to various actors, both governmental and voluntary, in an efficient and secure communication system.

During the years when I have served in various crisis situations I have often noticed that as international actors arrive at the scene of the crisis, they try to recruit local staff from the best available sources. Often the terms of service are such that they can get almost anyone they want. This may lead to a depletion of the administrative resources of the host country and may make it more difficult, not less difficult, to engage the authorities of the host country in sustainable and successful projects. The local ownership may be difficult to achieve and thus there often is a gap between those who want to give a hand and those who would like to grasp it. Too often those willing to help are prepared to do things for those in need when they really should not do anything for them but with them.

To be decisive external resources are best mobilised early. That is only possible if the principal actors are well informed about developments that might lead to a crisis and they understand well the underlying reasons for the conflict. If such preparedness is coupled with a capacity to act swiftly and in a pre planned way, good results are possible. He who gives early, gives twice is an age old saying. Not without a good cause.

Sometimes it is said that while practical action is necessary, important crisis call, nevertheless, for a political solution. In my experience a political solution is more likely to succeed if it is complemented with very practical down to earth acts. Mere political gestures cannot achieve what tangible practical deeds can. One supports the other, one lends credibility to the other. Rather than make a choice between the two I believe that they should best be combined into one.