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Statement by Minister of Defence Uza. Mariya Didi at the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Australia

Date: September 2022

After taking stock of our progress during the Global Platform for disaster risk reduction at Bali in May, it was clear that much more has to be done if we are to achieve the Agenda 2030. I believe this high-level regional conference will give impetus to our collective action within the Asia-Pacific region. Hence, I wish to thank the Government of Australia and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction for partnering to convene this important and timely gathering to intensify the momentum of action.

All of us have come out of a devastating pandemic by assisting each other. But the climate emergency was upon us long before the COVID-19. The science is warning us of a dystopian if we fail to act now. I see this forum as a renewed commitment of our countries to work together in addressing the common and critical problems of disaster management, climate change, environmental security, and associated challenges.

The World Bank estimates that in the South Asia region alone, there are over 800 million people at risk due to disasters



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worsened by climate change including loss of crops due to rain, dried up water sources, forcing people to leave their traditional homes. For smaller states like ours, the interplay of climate change and disaster risk is more direct and more dangerous. This interplay threatens our basic right to exist, live and thrive as a holistic socio-political and cultural entity. Irregular weather conditions are causing significant damage to Maldives' lifeline infrastructure and households. Severity of these irregularities has increased, manifested by recurrent flooding in our urban cities and island communities and eroding shorelines and destroying our crops.

As a conduit of global trade, maritime routes of the Indian Ocean are the lifeline of the interconnected world. And Maldives is at the heart of it. As maritime traffic in the region grows, so does the exposure our fragile ecosystems to maritime accidents and incidents. Our maritime disaster response and recovery abilities are minimal. For a nation, over ninety percent of whose GDP is linked to its biodiversity, a major maritime accident in Maldivian waters would cause extensive ecological damages which will take years or decades to recover from.

To achieve the targets of the Sendai Framework, in the Maldives, we are taking concrete steps within the bounds of our means. Since the adoption of the Sendai Framework in 2015, Maldives has successfully implemented significant policy changes, laying down the foundation for institutionalizing disaster risk reduction and disaster management efforts. Although we have had a



governing law for disaster management, its implementation only started under the leadership of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. The previous Disaster Management Centre has been changed into the National Disaster Management Authority and empowered both as a governing body as well as an implementation agency.

Maldives has taken significant steps in strengthening our disaster risk governance through plans and strategies, developing competence, and increased coordination within and across sectors. To expedite the implementation of the Sendai Framework, we have incorporated over 40 disaster risk management targets and indicators under 14 strategies across 8 policy areas in the government’s five-year Strategic Action Plan. However, COVID-19 caused significant setbacks to our plans as Maldives recovers from its impact.

Significant improvements are also seen in the participation of relevant stakeholders throughout the disaster risk management cycle, collaboration and partnerships with state institutions, the private sector, as well as non-governmental organizations. Community participation is a central element of our approach to disaster risk reduction.

In addition to the current programs and activities, Maldives is also working with the UN Disaster Risk Reduction to develop our first National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy that integrates disaster



risk reduction and climate change adaptation into a cohesive policy framework. This will strengthen governance mechanisms to accelerate resilience building and harmonize strategies, policies and procedures to strengthen our coping mechanisms by mitigating risks and building response capacities. The strategy will also aim to offer a common basis for coordinated implementation across sectors and build on a shared understanding of disaster and climate risk.

To ensure national planning considers local resilience priorities and decentralized risk management, we are pursuing a systemic approach of coordinated governance oversight, effective resource allocation and enhancing collaboration between central and local governments in response and mitigation. We are also planning to establish regional disaster management centers in the country for faster response, greater community involvement and better coordination. This whole of nation approach in disaster management and disaster risk reduction ensures that our communities, information and technology community, civil society organizations, local governments and the central government are partners in our quest to build a resilient Maldives. I admit that this system is still at infancy; but as it matures and expands, we are confident that disaster management and risk reduction will be more holistically embedded in all layers of government and society.

The Government has also increased funding for targeted disaster risk reduction programs and increased investments to deliver



critical flood mitigation infrastructure and equipment to islands. We are also scaling up an already robust community-centered training and awareness regime. We are working very closely with island communities to establish disaster management plans and train community emergency response teams. These community-based disaster management programs, plans and activities recognize the importance given by the Sendai Framework to the roles of civil society including the private sector, women development committees, persons with disabilities and various age groups.

We are also formalizing partnerships with regional and extra regional countries and various international and local organizations to bridge gaps in disaster risk reduction, create more opportunities and learn from their practices.

While we are all eager to move past the pandemic, COVID-19 has changed our understanding of the risk context of each of our nations. If anything, the pandemic has only increased the drivers of risks. Science is clear on the trajectories of climate change and environmental damage. As we consider second and third order impacts, the order and magnitude of the challenge leaps and bounds beyond anything we have thus faced. The Government of Maldives considers the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction as an important guiding framework of action to address the myriad of climate change, environmental security and disaster management challenges we face.



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Like many nations represented here, the pandemic caused substantial setbacks to Maldives economy and consequently, to our disaster risk reduction targets. But with Almighty’s blessing and the astute leadership of President Solih, our economy has bounced back, and we are resolutely focused on our efforts to achieve the targets of the Framework. In June 2022, Kulhudhuffushi City of Maldives became the first city in Maldives to join the Making Cities Resilient 2030 initiative of UNDRR. The remaining cities will follow suit in the near future.

For the Maldives, disaster management and disaster risk reduction are directly tied to our security as well. For that reason, HADR is a central aspect of our security partnerships as well. Based on Maldives’ proposal, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) is now a Pillar of Cooperation of the Colombo Security Conclave. Maldives has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with India for disaster management cooperation. Work is in progress to increase such partnerships. Our circumstances compel us to take such comprehensive and outward-looking approaches to disaster management.

We are already halfway through the term prescribed for implementing the Sendai Framework. But the road ahead of us is less than desirable. To accelerate its implementation, we ask for even greater collaboration among countries. We believe international and regional organizations and even countries with well-established civil protection and emergency management



systems can assist countries like ours more in providing technical assistance and to build capacity and resilience.

Small island nations like the Maldives are struggling to access finance to build our disaster governance mechanisms, implement integrated policies and build capacity to enhance community-resilience. This inability to finance disaster preparedness and mitigation is the biggest challenge we face in effective implementation of the Sendai Framework 2030.

I say this not as an excuse for our shortfalls in reaching the Sendai Framework goals. Maldives is firmly committed to the implementation of the framework. But we need to have these difficult conversations if we hope to secure a safe and resilient future for our people. These conferences and platforms must pave ways for countries like the Maldives easier access to affordable finance. Sources of finance that are buried in bureaucratic layers and sources of finance that primarily considers the economic risks of asking nations should not be our only options. It is the collective responsibility of all of us to collaborate and assist each other on finding solutions to these challenges.

If our collective actions are not sufficient enough to secure the less privileged and the most vulnerable among us, then we will have failed as a whole. I refuse to believe that as an option and that is why we are all here. I am very hopeful that we will leave



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this conference with a greater conviction that there is reason for hope, and we can get there together.

Once again, thank you for convening this conference with a regional focus and for the excellent arrangements.

Thank you.