

**Statement by His Excellency Mr. Muhammedmian Soomro, Chairman Senate of Pakistan on the occasion of Annual Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations from October 31 to November 1, 2005 The Responsibility to Protect – Early and Coordinated Response in Dealing with Crisis Situations**

**Mr. President,**

**Mr. Secretary-General,**

**Distinguished Parliamentarians,**

Keeping in view the contemporary context of events, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has indeed taken up a very relevant theme for this session. A high intensity earthquake of 7.6 Richter scale epicentered in Pakistan and close to the surface brought about massive destruction in Afghanistan, India and mainly Pakistan. Given our experiences in Pakistan, it can be argued that the early warning preparedness and coordinated response in dealing with natural disasters is of utmost importance. This cannot be possible without devising elaborate mechanisms for the protection of the people threatened and suffering in crisis situations.

As you all may be aware, the impact of the October 8<sup>th</sup> earthquake proved to be the worst tragedy that any country or possibly the world has ever witnessed in recent times. It resulted in colossal loss of human life and property. So far, over fifty-four thousand people have been killed and seventy-eight thousand injured, most of them with multiple fractures. Over 32,000 children have died. Thousands have been maimed, handicapped, widowed and orphaned. This toll is continuously escalating and by the hours. More than 3.3 million people have been left homeless. This includes many elderly and senior citizens. The quake badly affected a 30,000 square kilometers area. The infrastructures, including government offices, roads, bridges, civic facilities, hospitals and educational institutions, in these areas have been completely destroyed. The damage is way beyond the resources of any one country to cope with.

This massive earthquake is an issue of global importance. It has brought about an unprecedented disruption in civil society and the economy, and threatens the livelihood of the millions because of the loss of life and the damage to property and businesses.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Earthquakes, tsunamis, torrential rains, heavy snow, high winds (typhoons, hurricanes, tornados, etc.) floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, forest and bush fires, droughts, and other natural disasters cause serious damage in various forms in countries throughout the world every year. Many developing nations are vulnerable to natural disasters, and have difficulty in recovering from the resulting damage and rebuilding their social infrastructures.

Over 90 per cent of those who died in natural disasters from 1978 through 2002 were people in the developing nations. Moreover, in developing countries in general, the socially vulnerable poor are frequently the ones who suffer the most and end up becoming displaced persons or refugees. The secondary effects of natural disasters, such as food shortages, inappropriate medical facilities and the deterioration of sanitary conditions, become prolonged, and develop into equally or even more serious problems. Just the scarcity of potable water causes major problems and leads to water-borne and other diseases. Pakistan is facing a severe spread of possible epidemics, dehydration and diarrhoea.

**Mr. President,**

Governments and Parliaments must give priority to preparing and maintaining, even rehearsing, effective disaster management plans. There is a dire need to make elaborate preparations for disasters long before they occur. It is understandable that diverting time and money away from existing problems in order to plan and strategize for a potential disaster is generally and sometimes politically difficult. Given our experience of earthquakes and other recent examples including that of Tsunami, it can be argued that governments have to be prepared to respond quickly and practically to such threats and disasters. This is only possible if both governments and Parliaments are appropriately prepared and well resourced. Governments should have mandatory and regular reviews of disaster preparedness, including updates to Parliaments.

Preparations for disasters include development of policies that take the potential disasters into account and avoid exacerbating them, practices such as unsafe buildings in known flood plains or seismically sensitive areas, deforestation, damaging natural drainage systems, eco damage, indifference to environmental needs and contribution to global warming are man-made contributions to “natural” disasters.

Parliaments have a direct role and responsibility in addressing crisis situations. In preparedness or during the crisis situations and post-crisis phases like rehabilitation and reconstruction, parliaments – have a crucial role in forging national consensus and assisting all national and international organizations involved.

Parliaments have several key functions to perform in the event of disasters. These include passing the necessary emergency preparatory and response legislation, approving budgets and preparing communications strategies. The members, as opinion leaders, can provide information to the public to curb rumours, and scrutinize executive readiness and mobilize the public and all resources so that the emergency relief can be provided as soon as it is needed. Resolutions to declare states of emergency and procedures to pass supplementary budget to cope with disasters should be immediately ready when required.

The recent events, including the devastating earthquake we have experienced, demonstrate the need for Parliamentarians to be proactive instead of reactive. The political will to keep disasters on the agenda must be maintained particularly for the long reconstruction phases, so that sustained support remains.

In scrutinizing the executive’s use of extra emergency authority, we need to be constructive and ready to play our key role in the warning and post-disaster phase. Parliamentary involvement in disaster response will help ensure that the executive’s extra authority is properly synergized while responding to a crisis situation. There should be overall transparency and good governance.

In addition, Parliaments should support the training of emergency professionals and should ensure that the governments plan for various possible threats and disasters, not just the last disaster, and keep the planning, up to date. We must identify availability of relevant equipment (such as needed for excavation from collapsed buildings or re-establishing land communications or setting up of temporary housing etc.); human and other pertinent resources required. Because of the topography of our affected area, air transport, specifically helicopters were a dire need. Because of the very fast approaching (in a couple of weeks) winter, snow and blizzards; the priority is shelter, blankets and warmth. Large scale amputations make it imperative for the provision of appropriate artificial limbs and trauma treatment; so that thousands can be more functional and with self respect.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is indeed very important to involve local communities in crisis situations so that the people can play their roles in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction, identify availability of needed equipment, HR and other relevant resources.

There is a need to involve the local people especially the women and youth so that the new homes and facilities actually meet local needs. Roads, schools, health clinics, water and food supplies need to be planned in consultation with local community.

Warning systems must be directly linked to the communities under threat. The volunteers should also be involved with communities as they are trained in how to respond and to give timely warnings and advice to local people.

**Mr. President,**

There is a need for greater sharing of resources, experiences, expertise and information so that the regional and global responses can be mobilized rapidly and effectively when disasters strike. Some international cooperation is already in place, but much more sharing of information and expertise of this kind is still needed for early warnings also. We must move quickly on the 2005 Kobe Summit and Japan initiated suggestions.

Besides Parliaments and governments, Non-governmental Organizations and citizens' groups have also to be involved as natural disasters of the magnitude seen recently far surpass the capacity of governments and countries to deal with on their own. A global emergency fund must be established. Even a small percentage of GDP's of developed nations will provide adequate contribution to such a concept.

I express my deep gratitude and appreciation for the fact that the United Nations and its specialized agencies, as well as many governments and international organizations have come forward immediately to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the earthquake victims in Pakistan and other South Asian countries. May God Almighty rewards them for this.

I thank you, Mr. President, for providing me an opportunity to share my views.

May God Almighty protect and bless us all.

**Thank you.**