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Disasters trap the poor in a vicious circle of poverty

Poor people have been the hardest hit by the recent storms and floods affecting many countries across the world.

“The extreme and repeated consequences of hurricanes in the Caribbean and the USA show that development levels are directly linked to the toll that natural hazards take on a country’s population,” says Salvano Briceño, Director of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Secretariat (UNISDR) in Geneva.

“Haiti, which is one of the poorest nations in the world with some 70 percent of people living on less than two dollars per day - has suffered more than any of its Caribbean neighbors from the four recent storms. It will take years before its population recovers. People have lost everything they had: their houses, assets and sources of income.”

In a comparable situation, after Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras in 1998, President Carlos Flores declared, “We lost in 72 hours what [has] taken more than 50 years to build”.

“Even if a developed country is highly hazard-prone, they are still far less vulnerable than a less-developed country with weak infrastructure and limited capacity for prevention and response,” said Briceño.

94% of people killed by natural hazards between 1975-2000 were on low incomes or lower middle incomes; half of all disaster deaths for the last decade occur in low human development countries. Climate change is likely to exacerbate the current situation. Poorer people are already more exposed and more vulnerable to hazards, suffer greater loss of assets, and have a lower capacity to cope and recover from disasters.

Recent examples of disaster vulnerability in poor countries compound the hundreds dead in Haiti’s recent storms. More than 18 million people were affected by floods across India .

“Poverty and disasters are linked. The Millennium Development Goals will not be fully achieved if disaster risk reduction is not among the solutions used to reduce poverty,” says Salvano Briceño. “Disasters badly affect the most vulnerable people and consign them to a vicious circle of poverty.”

The issue is expected to be further addressed in the Secretary-General’s Ministerial meeting to be held on 29 September in New York. The meeting called ‘Disaster risk reduction in a changing

climate' intends to promote disaster risk reduction among Ministers and mobilize resources to make the most vulnerable populations more resilient to climate-related disasters.