

MOE-UNICEF SCHOOL EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PROGRAM, MALAYSIA SOFT LAUNCH

Kuala Muda Kedah, Malaysia • Thursday, 10 August 2006

REMARKS

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Ladies and Gentlemen

THE TSUNAMI AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN

More than a year ago, a natural disaster like no other in recent history, shook the world, and shattered and destroyed the lives of so many children.

Malaysia, like its neighbours, Indonesia and Thailand, was stunned at what had happened. Although smaller in scale, the tsunami wrecked its own pathway of destruction in Penang and Kedah, causing misery and pain for the communities affected. Lost lives, lost homes, lost livelihoods. It was sudden and unexpected. And it was Malaysia's worst ever disaster.

Children, who were preparing to welcome a new school year, were tragically caught up in the maelstrom, unsure and uncertain of what exactly had happened and why it had happened. A tsunami was unheard of, not part of the country's history or its folklore. The children's confusion and fear was not surprising. Malaysia is, after all, a land blessed with mainly good natured weather.

THE AFTERMATH - PARTNERSHIPS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

The days and weeks ahead were tiring, difficult ones, but borne with fortitude and strength. As a result of sound infrastructure and strong political will, the Government responded immediately to ensure that its people were looked after. UNICEF is honoured for having been given the opportunity to join your Government in partnership to meet the needs of children and their families in the affected areas, including here, in Kuala Muda Kedah.

Through collaboration across sectors, with the Kedah State Education Department, the Kedah State Health Department, HELP University College, and EMPOWER, UNICEF restored hope by strengthening community resilience through psychosocial activities with children, women, men and local leaders. Our experience from around the world reinforced our Malaysian response.

We knew that children affected by a disaster would suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder with typical symptoms of insomnia, agitation, depression, phobia, anxiety and nightmares. We also knew that if left untreated, the disorder can surface several months or even years after the disaster, manifesting itself in extreme behaviour disorders including self isolation or aggression.

With this in mind, UNICEF quickly commissioned a team of researchers from HELP University College to conduct a needs analysis in Kuala Muda Kedah and Penang. The team, made up of three psychologists and one counsellor, confirmed what we had suspected. The tsunami had left emotional scars on several children who experienced the event. And so began our process of engagement with the community representing village leaders, teachers, nurses, paramedics. All of these “community leaders” were trained in psychosocial counseling so they could respond to the mental health needs of their children. By building capacity on the ground, we were putting in place an integrated infrastructure for psychosocial well being. The message was clear. UNICEF and our partners were not looking for quick-fix remedies, but solutions that would last way beyond the recovery period.

More than 18 months have passed since that fateful day in December 2004, and our work is not over. In fact, it is only beginning.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

BUILDING BACK BETTER

UNICEF has worked on the frontlines of many disasters around the world. Our 60 years of experience in emergencies, including natural disasters, has taught us that a disaster response must never be confined to the immediate. Instead, we need to hold on to a vision that encompasses a belief in a better future, not only for those directly affected by the disaster, but for the communities and the people of that nation. Anything less would be unjust.

Post-disaster interventions should never be a simple restoration of pre-existing livelihoods and infrastructure. Instead, it should be treated as an opportunity to implement better development policies, to "build back better," and to strengthen individual faith and confidence

Our vision has demanded we work towards minimizing the risk of a disaster – on the nation’s economy, its communities and its children. Disaster preparedness and planning are crucial to safeguard and protect the interests of the people. Early warning systems are the key to effective risk reduction. They do save lives and livelihoods.

We also know that the most effective early warning takes more than scientifically advanced monitoring systems, as underscored by the recent tsunami in the southern coast of Java. All the sophisticated technology won't matter if we don't reach real communities and people. Satellites, buoys, data networks will make us safer, but we must invest in the training, the institution building, and the awareness raising on the ground. People must understand how to prepare and respond to a disaster, as well as how to deal with the aftermath. What better place to start this education than at schools?

SCHOOL EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PROGRAM

Our work last year proved that schools are a safe and neutral space for post recovery psychosocial programs. Schools are also a place of learning and a place that offers a protective environment for children. It is, simply put, a natural choice to institute an integrated service for education, health and social welfare. And hence, the birth of the **MOE-UNICEF Schools Emergency Preparedness Program**. A collaboration between the Ministry of Education and UNICEF, the program is testimony of our commitment to the people and Government of Malaysia to build back better.

Much effort has been invested by our partners in this multi-pronged program which will amongst others develop practical guidelines for emergency preparedness planning for school children in Malaysia, covering natural disasters more common to Malaysia such as floods, landslides and haze. To ensure success in rolling the program nationwide, we will train a pool of teachers and education officers to be resource persons in community-based emergency preparedness programs for schools. An Emergency Preparedness Guide will also be produced through student participation which will be used to complement a manual for the Ministry’s officials and educators.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here with all of you this morning for the soft launch of the **MOE-UNICEF Schools Emergency Preparedness Program**.

Honourable Dato' Dr. Ahamad bin Sipon, UNICEF is aware of how hard the Ministry of Education works to ensure the best for the children in Malaysia. I thank you for this partnership opportunity to contribute to the well-being and safety of Malaysia's children.

Workshop participants, please allow me to congratulate all of you for your work this past week. I am aware of the diverse make-up of participants representing not only the Ministry of Education but also the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, Royal Malaysian Police, Fire and Rescue Services Department, Red Crescent Society and MERCY Malaysia. I am sure the past week was an enriching experience for all of you and I look forward to the first draft of the Emergency Preparedness Booklet.

Before I conclude, I would like us to reflect on the recent disasters around the world, and particularly those in our region and in Malaysia. These years have shown that disasters can strike anywhere, at any time. As gloomy as this may be, we must remember that there is much that can be done by school officials to plan for disaster, to mitigate the risk, to protect the safety of students and teachers, and to ensure that schools recover quickly. The key, though, is timing.

UNICEF stands ready to support your Government when necessary to help communities pick up the pieces and recover in the aftermath of a disaster. But we are equally if not more prepared to be with you before a disaster strikes. We cannot undo the damage of a tsunami on an unprepared school or push back the clock after a flood has swept away a child's school term. Through this Program, we are working to encourage schools and communities to work together before a disaster strikes. As always, prevention is the best disaster action.

Thank you.