



**SPEECH FOR
Opening Ceremony**

**Regional training course on Health Emergency Response Operation
(HERO)**

21-25 November, 2011, Ho Chi Minh city, Viet Nam

Dr. Babatunde Olowokure

Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good Morning

On behalf of the Acting WHO Representative in Viet Nam, I am honored to be here today to attend the opening ceremony of the regional training course on Health Emergency Response Operations (HERO).

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Sandra Tempongko, Deputy-Director of SEAMEO TROPMED Network and her colleagues for their efforts in contributing to the close collaboration between SEAMEO TROPMED (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Network in Tropical Medicine and Public Health) and WHO preparedness training for disasters.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome international participants from the six countries to Ho Chi Minh city, and to thank the facilitators and resource persons who have made this event possible, and who I am sure will be working tirelessly to ensure the success of the course over the next few days.

The frequency of health emergencies and disasters in the region emphasizes the need for effective and efficient health emergency response operations. Southeast Asian countries are continuously affected by a variety of natural disasters, some of which occur on an annual basis. In recent years these have occurred as a result of typhoons, floods, landslides, flash floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, wildfires and droughts. Other disasters, which may be defined as non-natural – include technological disasters, such as nuclear accidents, mining accidents and bridge or dam collapses. Both types of disasters have tremendous human and economic impact and can substantially influence the socio-economic development of affected countries. I note the presence of colleagues from the

Philippines, one of the countries most affected by disasters in the world. Please take the opportunity to learn from their experiences.

Attributing human costs and economic losses to natural disasters is difficult, because of numerous factors. Nevertheless, earlier this year the World Bank estimated that the economic damage from the earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011 was \$235 billion USD. The death toll from this event is estimated to be over 13,000, with more than 12,000 people still missing. The Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, which caused some 250,000 deaths, resulted in estimated economic losses of \$14 billion USD.

Like other countries in Southeast Asia, every year Viet Nam suffers the consequences of typhoons, floods, and landslides. In 2009, typhoon Ketsana resulted in the loss of 172 lives, 860 people were injured and another 12 declared missing. In 2010, a severe flood in Central Viet Nam resulted in the loss of 143, lives, 128 injured people and, 24 people declared missing. Altogether 1.2 million people were said to be affected. More recently, in September 2011, a flood in the Mekong river delta claimed 58 lives and affected 92,000 people.

Due to limited resources and investment for disaster management, activities of the government have mainly focused on the response phase of emergency management. There has been limited investment in strengthening preparedness capacity and ensuring that the recovery phase takes advantage of a window of opportunity to “build back better”. This lack of investment goes some way to explaining why human and economic costs are still high when disasters strike, even in previously affected communities.

Although by definition we cannot avoid encountering the natural hazards that lead to natural disasters we can reduce the public health impact on the affected population. This training course aims to develop managers, leaders and other health professionals with a deeper understanding of the concepts, principles and processes of health emergency response operations. This increased technical competency will then contribute to the strengthening of the capacities in health emergency response operations at the country and community levels.

The goal is to enhance public safety and security through the provision of training opportunities in a cooperative and collaborative environment where people can interact and learn from each other. Having attended this training course we believe that you will be better prepared to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from a natural disaster and will have built an invaluable network of like-minded colleagues.

I wish all of you an enjoyable and successful week of training, and hope that your facilitators will allow you some time to enjoy Ho Chi Minh city.

Thank you