



# MEDIA RELEASE

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## Disaster Management Bangladeshi expert calls for new approach after receiving UN accolade

DHAKA: A leading disaster management expert has called for Bangladesh to review its response to natural calamities, shortly after receiving recognition from the United Nations (UN) for his outstanding commitment to reducing people's vulnerability to natural disasters in Bangladesh.

Mr. Muhammad Saidur Rahman, the founder and Director of the Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre, has been awarded the 'Certificate of Distinction' under the United Nation's Sasakawa Award for Disaster Reduction by the UN's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. The annual award honors outstanding individuals and organizations from all over the world for their efforts in disaster reduction. Nominated for the award by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Mr. Rahman became the first Bangladeshi to receive such an accolade, and he took the opportunity to encourage Government and donors to reconsider the way disasters are handled in Bangladesh.

"We can lessen the impact of disasters significantly if we empower people, especially the poor who are vulnerable to the threats of disasters, and if we integrate risk management into development activities," he said. "Since the Ministers and the Secretary for Disaster Management and Relief are very supportive of this approach, I am very much encouraged that we can change the mind-set of the key actors in Bangladesh from post-disaster response to pre-disaster preparedness and risk management," he said.

Bangladesh, with its low-lying land and extensive river system is prone to flooding and other natural calamities, including cyclones and earthquakes. Widespread poverty and high population density leave millions of people unable to protect themselves if disaster strikes.

However, UNDP Resident Representative Jorgen Lissner said that international recognition of Mr. Rahman's achievements through the Sasakawa Award proves that Bangladesh had reached a high standard of efficiency in disaster management. "Bangladesh has developed innovative approaches for reducing the impact of disasters through community involvement in planning and risk management. I would encourage donor countries to look at supporting these, as development assistance invested to manage disasters has a much higher humanitarian return than aid money spent after a disaster has struck", Jorgen Lissner said.



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One innovative approach developed in Bangladesh is a warning system conceived by Mr. Rahman following the devastating cyclone of 1970 that killed more than 300,000 people. The system carries alerts from the Meteorological Department, through radios to community teams that disseminated by foot, boat or whatever means of travel available, to warn every potentially affected village in their area. It was the first system of its kind in the world, and saved many lives when more cyclones hit Bangladesh.

Another innovative approach was developed in 1988 when Mr. Rahman was the Country Representative of Oxfam. Floodwaters submerged more than 68 percent of the country that year and millions of people lost everything and many were marooned and starving. Through radio and television appeals, Mr. Rahman organized more than 10,000 volunteers to make bread (chapati) with wheat-flour supplied by Oxfam. Millions of these chapatis were distributed to marooned people around the country. This idea has now become a popular life-saving practice during major disasters in Bangladesh.

Over the years, Mr. Rahman has written a number of books, including the 'Disaster Management Handbook for Bangladesh', 'Handbook for First Aid in Disaster Emergencies' and the 'Handbook for Family and Community Level Disaster Preparedness'. He has conducted a number of basic research and studies on various aspects of disaster management, particularly on indigenous coping capacities and survival techniques of the poor. He hopes to compile these local solutions into a series of 'best practices' that can be shared nation-wide. More recently he has been working on engaging social and community leaders, like Imams, teachers, traditional birth attendants, and folksingers, to promote pre-disaster preparedness at family and community levels.

When announcing their decision to award Mr. Rahman with the 'Certificate of Distinction', the Sasakawa Award Jury made the following remarks. "Considering the very high exposure of Bangladesh to a variety of natural hazards, Mr. Rahman's initiatives in the field of disaster reduction as an activist, team creator and team leader represent an important and dedicated effort that the Jury would like to recognize and commend. Together with his personal commitment to reducing peoples' vulnerability to natural disasters in Bangladesh through strong awareness-raising initiatives and the involvement of local communities in the decision-making and training processes for disaster reduction."

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