



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Remarks at the IRU Reception

**Remarks of Ambassador Bleich
at the IRU Reception
Launch of IRU Brochure
*Disaster Resilience: Preparing, responding and adapting***

(As prepared for delivery – August 17, 2011)

Good afternoon, and thank you for that very nice introduction.

It's a pleasure to be here among distinguished Members of Parliament and University leaders to launch this IRU Brochure on Disaster Resilience. This information will help in our joint efforts – Australia's and America's – to deal with major disasters.

Disaster Overview

Right now we are in a region plagued by disasters. And I'm not referring to being here in Parliament. [Laughter.]

We live today in a region of the world that only in the past few months has been struck by cyclones, floods, tsunamis, wild fires, and earthquakes.

The number of natural disasters in Asia and the Pacific is increasing. In the past 20 years, the average number of natural disasters per year has more than doubled. Floods have increased 177 percent, and storm disasters have increased nearly 73 percent. With the effects of global climate change, floods and other meteorological disasters are affecting more people than ever before.

Of course, foremost in our minds are the terrible floods we experienced here in Australia and in the U.S. Queensland suffered 3 tropical cyclones and 5 major floods over a four-month period, that affected 210 towns, killed 35 people and left \$5.2 billion in damage. The Southern Tornadoes/Mississippi River Flooding in the U.S. Midwest, caused 450 deaths, 116 in Joplin alone, and destroyed 7,000 homes.

But as devastating as these disasters were to our nations and all of the people affected, they represent just a fraction of the disasters worldwide. Just remember in Pakistan last summer, flooding affected more than 18.1 million people and damaged 1.7 million homes. Massive June flooding in China affected more than 134 million people. So far in 2011, natural disasters have killed an estimated 29,000 people in Asia and the Pacific.



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Remarks at the IRU Reception

What We Can Do

No nation has the resources to handle this scale of disaster alone. To put it in perspective, look at our own contributions. There are no two nations on earth that have been more generous than the United States and Australia. So far in 2011 alone, Australia has provided more than \$218 million and the U.S. has provided approximately \$2 billion in response to international disasters. Earlier this year, Australian and American search and rescue teams worked side by side in New Zealand and Japan to locate survivors of the devastating disasters in both nations. However, neither of us has the resources to handle the Japanese disaster alone let alone all of the disasters. The only solution is to pool our resources.

That means we need to work smarter. In addition to providing aid after events, we need to invest now in making communities safer. After each disaster, people always wish they had done this. With these terrible events fresh in our minds, now is the time to act. It will reduce suffering and it will reduce the cost of response.

Benefits of IRU Research Cooperation

The Research Cooperation among the IRU universities contributes to what we call DRR – disaster risk reduction (because we all agree that what the world really needs now is another acronym).

But DRR is more than just an idea or an acronym or a set of research papers: This is what DRR does:

- It means children in the Philippines can tell parents how to duck and cover when an earthquake hits.
- Families in Sendai, Japan, know to go to higher ground when they hear a tsunami-warning siren.
- Masons know how to construct earthquake-resistant houses in Nepal.
- And in the aftermath of a destructive earthquake in New Zealand, a city thanks its mayor for his consistent advocacy for safe building codes that saved their lives.

We saw how DRR principles helped save lives during the response to the Queensland floods, and the New Zealand quake; we've also seen how a lack of DRR exacerbated the horrific impact of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The earthquake in Haiti killed 316,000 people, and 634,000 others remain in displacement camps today—more than a year and a half after the earthquake. In contrast, the less than 200 people perished in the New Zealand earthquake. Enforced construction standards and zoning measures, combined with seismic-safe training for construction professionals, helped save lives, and allow communities to live without worry about their roofs caving in on them in an earthquake.



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Remarks at the IRU Reception

You can't prevent disasters, but you can reduce the loss of life and property that result from them, and IRU research on disaster resilience is seeking ways to do just that, while collaborating closely with U.S. counterparts.

For instance, the Cyclone Testing Station at James Cook University has a working relationship with the University of Florida. They are figuring out how to make homes more resilient to hurricanes and cyclones, and they share skills and testing equipment. Currently, they are focused on tiled roofing and garage doors, issues that were highlighted in the hurricanes in the USA and cyclones in Australia. The point is that this kind of research is very concrete and has broad practical implications.

Bilateral Collaboration

The United States and Australia have a long history of working closely together on emergency management and disaster relief. Last year, our Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security and your Attorney General signed a Memorandum of Understanding (or "MOU") for cooperation. Under it, our agencies meet regularly to improve coordination. Indeed, we just met less than a month ago, on July 25, in Washington, DC. Among the things we accomplished were new approaches on using satellite imagery, recovery techniques, and using social media.

The United States also has international firefighting agreements with Australia. We take advantage of the fact that we have alternating fire seasons and so Australian fire-fighters help attack wildfires on the U.S. west coast during the U.S. summer, and then fire-fighters from California, Utah, and other states come down here in December through February to fight fires in Australia.

Our countries also enjoy strong emergency preparedness and response cooperation in third countries at the field-level through USAID and AusAID, as exemplified by a number of ongoing USAID disaster response and DRR programs that complement Australian-funded initiatives, such as projects to strengthen disaster management capacity in South Pacific nations.

Prevention pays. A recent World Bank analysis revealed that every dollar invested in DRR programming saves between \$4 and \$7 in disaster response funding, in part by increasing the resilience of impoverished and other vulnerable groups.

Making this effort a success requires all of us to cooperate: government, the private sector, NGOs, and really smart folks like those at the IRU network will ensure that each of our limited resources will be used as effectively as possible.



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Remarks at the IRU Reception

So thank you to IRU for leading us in this critical effort. It is now my great pleasure to officially launch this Report and I look forward to it being read and used far and wide.

Thank you very much.